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THE
MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

VOLUME VII

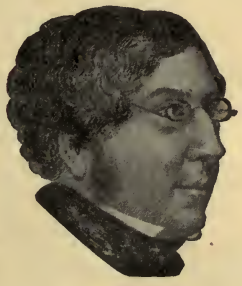
The Works of

George W. M. Reynolds

Venetia Trelawney

Volume II

The Mysteries of the Court of London



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THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE MARRIAGE

In George Street, leading into Hanover Square, stands St. George's Church, which is the most fashionable temple of Hymen within the precincts of the metropolis. It is aristocratic in appearance as well as by repute, — not even the sanctity of religion and the meekness of the Christian faith having been able to rescue it from the intrusive pomp, ostentation, and vain parade of the frivolous, heartless, and empty-headed upper classes. The panels in front of the galleries are emblazoned with the names of the "noble lords," "right honourables," and "honourables," who have from time to time filled the office of churchwardens; the decorations of the pews show that they are intended for the ease and comfort of the "higher orders;" and the general aspect of the interior is "eminently fashionable."

An arched recess, with a painted window, enshrines the altar, which is set in a sculptured framework. The window is essentially of the Romish sacred architecture; and this effect is heightened into an appearance of positive Catholicism not only by the representation of the Virgin and Child, the Dove, and the Crucifixion, in the stained glass, but also by the magnificent picture of the Last Supper behind the communion table.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning of Wednesday, September 25, 1814, that a tall, slender, handsome young

gentleman, dressed in deep mourning, slowly ascended the steps of the portico and entered St. George's Church, the doors of which were already opened. His countenance was pale and full of a deep melancholy; there was something peculiarly touching and profoundly interesting in its expression; and amiability, goodness, and generosity were at the same time blended in every trait.

On entering the church, the young gentleman proceeded straight to the vestry, where the clerk was seated at a table poring over one of the huge parish registers.

"Good morning, Mr. Malvern — or Sir Valentine Malvern, as I suppose I ought to call you," said the clerk, rising from his seat and making a low bow.

"It is true that my friends wish me to assume the family honours, as they have already persuaded me to take the management of the estate," observed the young gentleman, with a profound sigh; "but I cannot endure the thought of adopting a course which, after all, might prove an usurpation."

"I wish that I could give you any hope, sir, of your lamented father's restoration," said the clerk. "I had known him for many years, ever since he first came to live in Hanover Square, and I have therefore known you also, Sir Valentine, from your childhood — "

"Do not address me as if I were already in possession of the title, my good friend," interrupted Malvern. "I have vowed to suffer a year to pass before I will consider my father as really dead, although, to speak candidly, Mr. Jackson, I feel that I am hoping against hope's extinction, and therefore in very desperation."

"Alas! yes, Mr. Malvern, — since it is thus that you choose to be still called," observed the clerk; "so mysterious a disappearance, happening all on a sudden, and without leaving a trace behind, cannot be accounted for otherwise than by the supposition that accident or foul play must have overtaken the unfortunate gentleman. If it was an accident, sir, some clue would have been discovered; and therefore —"

"Proceed not, Jackson, —'tis too dreadful to reflect upon," interrupted Malvern. Then, as if to divert his thoughts from the melancholy topic, he said, "Have you found the entry in the register of births?"

"I have, sir," replied Jackson. "You were born on the

3d of July, 1792, and therefore you are a little past twenty-two years old. I suppose your trustees require official proof of your having attained your majority? "

"Precisely so," answered Valentine. "It is a mere matter of form, inasmuch as they are relatives of mine and know full well my exact age. But still it is necessary to have everything regular, and therefore you must give me a certificate."

"To be sure, Mr. Malvern," returned the clerk; and he proceeded to fill up the usual form, which he handed to Valentine. "By the bye, sir," he observed, "we are going to have a wedding in a few minutes. I did not know last evening, when I met you in the square and you told me that you required your baptismal certificate, I did not know, I say, that I should have to visit the church for another purpose this morning. Not that marriages are rare at St. George's, Heaven knows. Quite the contrary. But it was only late last evening that I received the intimation that there was one for this morning; and being a special license, I suppose it is rather a hurried affair," added the clerk, in a mysterious whisper; for he was evidently a man of garrulous propensities, although of kind disposition and inoffensive nature.

"Who are the happy pair?" asked Valentine, not choosing to offend the worthy man by cutting short the discourse abruptly, but in reality experiencing not the slightest interest in the question which he had just put.

"Mr. Horace Sackville and Miss Venetia Trelawney," replied the clerk. "Miss Trelawney, you know, is a celebrated beauty, — indeed, the most lovely woman that ever was seen. So I am informed, at least; for I have never seen her, to my knowledge."

"Nor I, either," observed Valentine. Then, impelled by some undefinable feeling of curiosity, he said, "I shall remain and witness the ceremony."

"Ah! sir," remarked Jackson, shaking his head solemnly, "these fashionable marriages that take place in this church often set me a-thinking in a strange way. I have seen young and beautiful creatures almost dragged, as it were, to the altar, to bestow their hands upon drivelling dotards old enough to be their grandfathers; and I have afterward watched their career in the world with great interest and

anxiety. The wives in these cases always turned out wrong sooner or later; in nine cases out of ten there have been elopements, crim. cons., divorces, and other disgraceful scenes. Then, again, I have beheld young bridegrooms leading withered old women to that altar, — spendthrifts, who, having run through their own fortunes, obtain by marriage an opportunity of running through the fortunes of others. Yes, sir, I have seen many, many marriages in this church, but few, very few indeed that were for real love and have led to happiness. To tell you the truth, Mr. Malvern, I don't think the upper classes, generally speaking, have got any hearts at all, and if they have, they're seldom or never in the right place."

"Most assuredly the English aristocracy is not distinguished for morality, generosity, or intelligence," observed Valentine.

At this moment the clergyman entered the vestry; and Valentine being well acquainted with him, they conversed together for a few minutes. But as the time for the ceremony was now at hand, Malvern retired into the church, where he entered a pew near the altar.

At that moment there were no other spectators present; but scarcely had Valentine taken his seat when the Earl of Curzon made his appearance in the church and walked slowly up the aisle. He was pale and evidently much annoyed, although he endeavoured to conceal his vexation. Observing Valentine, with whom he was well acquainted, he entered the same pew and sat down by his side. While they were conversing in a subdued tone, Sir Douglas Huntingdon arrived, and also walking up the aisle, he noticed the earl and Malvern, whom he immediately joined. His looks were perfectly good-humoured; and by the very first remark he made, he showed that he had not come thither by accident, nor was a stranger to the ceremony about to take place.

"Are you interested at all, Malvern, in Miss Trelawney's marriage?" he inquired, with a smile.

"How can I be?" asked the young gentleman. "I do not know her, nor do I believe that I have ever seen her. I came to the church on some business with the clerk, and hearing of what was about to take place, I remained to witness the ceremony."

" How did you know of it? " inquired the Earl of Curzon, in a whisper to Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

" Oh, from some secret information," answered the baronet. " How did you? "

" Also from some secret source," was the earl's response. " You do not appear to care about it at all."

" What is the use? " said Huntingdon. " Sackville is a lucky dog, that is all I can say. I shall offer him and Venetia my congratulations. But you seem to be particularly chagrined."

" I did not think it possible that the matter could have ended thus," replied Curzon, petulantly. " But here they come! "

The doors at the entrance were thrown open as the earl was speaking; and the whispered colloquy, which Valentine Malvern did not overhear, was thus cut short.

The bridal party entered the church. It consisted of Venetia Trelawney, Horace Sackville, Mrs. Arbuthnot, her daughter Penelope, Miss Bathurst, Doctor Copperas, and two or three other ladies and gentlemen, all the arrangements having been made under the supervision of Miss Bathurst, who, be it remembered, was Horace Sackville's aunt.

As the reader may suppose, Venetia looked transcendently beautiful in her virgin raiment. Her countenance was pale; her looks were downcast, and the long fringes that veiled her deep blue eyes rested upon her cheeks. A gentle melancholy and soft bashfulness blended in the expression of her features; but she seemed far lovelier at this moment of timidity and embarrassment than when radiant with the smiles of triumph or dignified in the presence of insult. Above her forehead, within the elegant white bonnet, lay her rich auburn hair, of velvet smoothness, and having the appearance of dark gold as the prismatic light from the painted window fell upon it. The virgin drapery displayed all the grand contours and flowing outlines of her shape, that form in which voluptuous fulness was so admirably blended with symmetrical proportion. Nor was the dress itself whiter than the bosom of which it allowed transient glimpses, and the swelling volume of which gave such richness to her figure in a profile view and rendered the waist more delicate than even it really was.

Horace Sackville experienced a joy which beamed in his

looks, and a disinterested beholder would have thought that so handsome and elegant a young man was indeed well fitted to lead so charming a bride to the altar. Miss Bathurst and Penelope, who officiated as bridesmaids, were both beautifully dressed, as was also Mrs. Arbuthnot; and Doctor Copperas, proud of the honour of being selected to give the bride away, whispered to Miss Bathurst that his only regret was that "so eminent a man and shrewd an observer of human nature as Doctor Thurston was not present to enrich his phrenological knowledge by contemplating the countenances of the happy couple."

On passing toward the altar, Sackville noticed Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the Earl of Curzon, to whom he bowed, and he could not prevent a gleam of triumph from appearing for a moment upon his countenance. The baronet returned his salutation with friendly familiarity, the earl with cold hauteur. Venetia looked neither to the right nor to the left, and did not therefore observe them.

Not only, however, was she noticed by her two unsuccessful suitors, but also by Valentine Malvern, who started on catching the first glimpse of her countenance, for it instantaneously struck him that he had seen her before. The where, the when, and the circumstances also flashed to his mind in a moment; and he contemplated her with a more earnest attention as she passed up the central avenue of the church. There was a mingled expression of astonishment and doubt in his features as he thus followed her with his eyes; and when she reached the altar and her countenance was no longer visible, her back being now turned toward him, he said, in a low whisper, to the Earl of Curzon, "Is that Miss Trelawney?"

"It is," replied the nobleman.

"Then I must be mistaken," thought Valentine to himself; but resuming his seat in the pew and bending his head forward, he gave way to the reflections that were now uppermost in his mind.

The clergyman and clerk had in the meantime taken their places at the communion table, and the marriage ceremony commenced. Scarcely had it begun when two more individuals entered the church, one taking his place somewhat noisily in a pew, and the other planting himself in the remotest angle of the sacred edifice. The former was Captain

Tash, whose nose seemed to indicate that his morning draught at the Green Dragon had been none of the weakest; the latter was his man Robin, who appeared quite astonished at finding himself inside a church, especially the most fashionable one of the West End.

The ceremony was completed, and Venetia became the wife of Horace Sackville. The happy pair received the congratulations of those who belonged to the bridal party; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, advancing with a frank affability, requested permission to offer his congratulations likewise. As for the Earl of Curzon, he remained in the pew for a few moments longer; then, suddenly prompted by some thought, he followed the baronet toward the altar.

Venetia had received the congratulations of Sir Douglas Huntingdon in the same spirit in which they were evidently offered; but the moment her eyes met the looks of the Earl of Curzon, a flush of displeasure appeared upon her countenance.

"I congratulate you, Mrs. Sackville, upon this happy occasion," he said, in a low tone and with accents that were full of a malignant irony; then, turning abruptly away, as Venetia drew herself up haughtily, he took Horace aside for an instant, muttering in his ear, "I congratulate you also upon your marriage with one who has abandoned herself both to Leveson and the prince, and on the same evening, too."

He then turned away and walked out of the church, followed by Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Sackville, who was staggered for a moment, almost instantaneously recovered himself; and giving his arm to his lovely bride, he led her toward the vestry, where the register was to be signed. This ceremony being completed, the party quitted the church.

Two carriages were waiting at the door to convey the company to Miss Bathurst's residence in Stratton Street, where an elegant repast was prepared. Lady Wenlock, the Honourable George Macnamara, and Lieutenant Apsley of the Guards, who had been invited, were already there; and the usual healths were drunk. Doctor Copperas, in making a speech, observed that "it was assuredly the happiest morning he had ever passed in all his life, with the one exception of the memorable and never-to-be-forgotten day on which he first had the honour of being introduced to

that extraordinary man, the ornament of his profession, Doctor Thurston."

The breakfast was over, a footman announced that the carriage was in readiness, and Sackville handed his bride into the vehicle. The serious-looking old livery servant and Jessica were seated in the rumble behind; the trunks were packed upon the roof, and, all being in readiness, the postilion drove away at a rapid rate.

The happy couple were bound for Brighton, where they intended to pass a few days. They spoke but little until the travelling-carriage was beyond the southern outskirts of London; but they sat with their hands united in each other's clasp, and exchanging fond looks. For Horace adored and worshipped the charming creature who had become his bride; and Venetia was not indifferent to the fervid attachment, the personal appearance, and the elegant manners of him who was now her husband.

"Did not Curzon whisper something annoying in your ears, Horace?" inquired Venetia, at length, a slight flush appearing upon her countenance. "Tell me what he said," she urged, seeing that Sackville hesitated to reply.

"He said that he was aware of your visit to Lord Leveson and also to the prince on the same evening," answered Horace.

"And so were you," replied Venetia, laughing. "But you were also acquainted with the particulars of these interviews and the results of each."

"I was nevertheless startled at the moment, my angel," said Horace; "because I could not possibly conceive how the earl came to learn that you had paid those visits."

"He employed spies to follow me," said Venetia, her musical laugh sounding deliciously upon her husband's ears, although he felt deeply indignant at the announcement which excited her gaiety. "I discovered it all yesterday; his spies were even in the church ere now. But let us converse on other matters for the present; and I will tell you all about the spies on some future occasion."

"Be it so, dearest," said Horace, as he gazed with inexpressible devotion on the lovely creature who was now his own.

Meantime, Valentine Malvern had returned to his own house at No. 20, Hanover Square, his mind filled with the

image of Venetia; and he even reproached himself frequently during the remainder of the day for allowing the incidents of the morning to divert his thoughts at all from the painful topic on which they were hitherto wont to be settled, namely, the unaccounted-for disappearance of his father, Sir Archibald.

With regard to the happy couple, we might record all the tender and interesting things which they said to each other during the ride to Brighton. We might say how they reached that fashionable watering-place at a late hour in the evening, how they took up their quarters at the principal hotel, and how they both longed, with a secret rapture which they mutually concealed, for the arrival of the moment that was to crown their wedded bliss. But we must not dwell upon those details, nor prolong unnecessarily this portion of our narrative. If, however, we may penetrate for a single instant into the nuptial chamber, where Jessica hastily divested her mistress of her apparel, we might observe that never, never had Venetia appeared more transcendently lovely than when, with blushing cheeks and heaving bosom, she heard her faithful attendant expatiate upon the handsome appearance of the bridegroom. We might add that in the meantime Horace himself was waiting with all possible anxiety in an adjacent dressing-room; and we might close our observations by stating that when at length Jessica had withdrawn, and the happy pair were clasped in each other's arms, they both forgot any disagreeable circumstances which pertained to their union, and abandoned themselves to those delights which Milton did not deem unworthy to be apostrophized and honoured in his immortal verse.

CHAPTER II

AN ARISTOCRATIC PAIR

It was about noon on the day of the marriage just described, and a beautiful lady was lounging negligently upon a sofa in a handsomely furnished apartment at a mansion in Grosvenor Street.

She was about six and twenty years of age, of middle height, and of dark but clear complexion. There was a peculiar beauty in the full lips of bright scarlet; and these, together with her flashing eyes and decisively pencilled brows, indicated the warmth of her temperament.

Her countenance was of an Oriental style of loveliness, irradiated, as it were, with a dark yet glowing lustre. Her hair was not precisely of sable blackness, but had that purple and glossy hue which made it shining, soft, and smooth as velvet; its luxuriance was remarkable, and, the lady's toilet not having as yet been achieved, the heavy tresses hung in massive clusters upon the firm, plump, and polished shoulders. Her profile was softly aquiline, without anything approaching to prominency of feature, save in respect to the lips, which were luscious and full, but not coarse. The teeth which they revealed, when parting in smiles that breathed a tender sensuousness, were of pearly whiteness; and her looks were brilliant and animated, with a provocative expression of subdued wantonness.

Her bust was purely sculptural, the chest being somewhat narrow, and the bosoms by no means exuberant, but of sufficient development to mark the statue-like contours of her shape. They were well detached, rising in perfect hemispheres, and sustaining the beauty of their proportions by their own firmness; for at the moment we are describing this lady she wore neither corset nor artificial means

of compressure. An elegant morning-wrapper was drawn loosely around her form, and confined at the waist by a broad ribbon negligently tied.

Her arms were not stout, but most symmetrically modelled; and nothing could exceed the beauty of her hand, with the pellucid nails seeming like supporting arches to the taper fingers, and of a rosy tint. Her feet were long and narrow; the ankles were not too slight, but perfectly rounded, and swelling gradually upward into a fine development of limb. Passion was in her looks, but a voluptuous and dreamy langour was in her attitude as she reclined upon the sofa.

The Oriental duskiness of her complexion, appearing like the softest and most delicate tinge of bronze, made her seem a warm and glowing creature, with the hottest blood running in her veins and ready to mantle in crimson flush upon the countenance at the slightest emotion. Then how eloquent would become her features with those ardent and passionate blushes, but eloquent only of consuming sensuousness or some other feeling equally intense. She did not seem a woman who could love fondly, but furiously, not a being susceptible of any lasting impression, but full of erratic longings and desires. Nevertheless, as if profoundly conscious of her own nature and understanding all the weakness as well as all the strength of her soul, she assumed in society a look of calm bashfulness and modest reserve, which led even the most experienced observer to suppose that she was a woman whose fervid temperament was kept under becoming restraint by an innate virtue and sense of propriety that rose dominant above her passions.

Such was Editha, the Countess of Curzon.

Though the aristocracy, generally speaking, are licentious and immoral to a degree, there are certain families belonging to that sphere who are more than the rest notorious for hereditary profligacy. Depravity would seem to run in their blood, and to be as traditionary as their titles and estates. The factitious honour of birth and the flagrant dishonour of conduct would appear to be a concurrent heritage in these cases. To such a family did Lady Curzon belong. She was one of six sisters; all were heiresses, all were married, and Editha was the only one of the six who had not proved faithful to the family character by being convicted in a court of justice of being unfaithful to her

husband. The five sisters were all divorced, and had either married again or were living in a disreputable manner with paramours. Whether Editha was really faithful to the Earl of Curzon will presently transpire; at all events, scandal had never breathed a sentence against her reputation. Her mother had been a notorious demirep, her aunts were all invested with the same unenviable notoriety; and Editha was the only female scion of her family who had reached the age of twenty-six without figuring in a trial for crim. con., or in a divorce case before the House of Lords.

She was lounging, as already stated, upon the sofa, when the door opened and her husband entered the room. After having witnessed the marriage of Venetia and Horace at St. George's Church, he had taken a walk in the park to endeavour to dissipate his ill-humour and vexation; but this condition of feeling was only aggravated, instead of becoming appeased, the more he gave way to thought. He accordingly returned home at about noon; and, although he was not accustomed to vouchsafe much of his company to his wife, the fantasy nevertheless took hold of him to seek her presence on this occasion.

"Well, Editha, all alone, and not dressed yet?" he exclaimed, flinging himself into a chair at some distance from where she was reclining on the sofa.

"It is too early for visitors, and I do not feel inclined to go out in the carriage to-day," she answered, in a manner not precisely cold, but indifferent.

"By the bye, you asked me for some money yesterday," observed the nobleman, "and I promised to give you some to-day. Here are a couple of hundred guineas. I borrowed two thousand of Emmerson, a bill-broker in the City."

"Ah! I have heard the name before," said Editha. "But what do you suppose I can do with two hundred guineas toward paying all that is owing?"

"You must do what you can, my dear," replied the earl, with perfect unconcern. "I wanted the remainder for my own special purposes."

At this moment a servant entered the room bearing a letter on a silver tray, which she handed to the countess. She took it languidly, supposing that it was a note of invitation or frivolous correspondence from some female friend; but the instant she caught a glimpse of the handwriting,

she started slightly, in a scarcely perceptible manner, while a gentle flush appeared upon her countenance. The earl, who was observing her at the instant, noticed that little movement and this transient glow; and he said, " Who is your correspondent? "

" No one of any importance," replied Editha; and having hastily scanned the contents of the note, she thrust it into her bosom.

The earl was neither astonished by the evasive answer which she gave him, nor by the manner in which she thus disposed of the letter, for they had long ceased to be on terms of mutual confidence and were not accustomed to communicate, much less peruse, each other's correspondence. But he had noticed the start and the flush, and a suspicion, faint as the first glimmer of dawn in the Oriental sky, gleamed in his brain.

This was the first time he had ever entertained an idea derogatory to the honour of his wife. On the contrary, he had hitherto believed her strictly faithful to her marriage vows. But now — he scarcely knew why — a certain uneasiness crept slowly upon him. That start, almost imperceptible as it was, and that blush, faint and transient though it were, had engendered a vague and undefined misgiving in his breast. The next moment he found himself reflecting upon the fact that Editha belonged to a family notorious for its profligacy; and he knew full well that her own passions were of the strongest, most fervid, and insatiable description.

All these thoughts traversed his brain in a few moments; but dissembling the incipient uneasiness which he experienced, and suddenly determining not to excite in her mind the suspicion that he even entertained such a misgiving, he began to converse upon a variety of ordinary topics. On the other hand, Editha fancied that her temporary emotion on receiving the letter had escaped his observation; and she discoursed with more gaiety and friendliness than she had for a long time manifested toward her husband.

He would have given worlds to obtain a peep, just one peep, at that letter; but the thing was impracticable. At one moment he was half-inclined to seat himself by her side and begin to toy and dally with her; but such a course, by being most unusual on his part, would at once have excited her suspicions as to his real object. He therefore

abandoned the idea, and resolved to watch her movements.

Luncheon was presently served up; and afterward Lady Curzon retired to her chamber to dress. The earl went out to visit some friends; but they all noticed that he looked gloomy and absent. At six he returned home to dinner; and as there was no company that day, he and his wife were alone together. He drank more freely than usual, and forced himself into a gaiety which was, after all, so well assumed that it entirely deceived the countess.

"What are you going to do with yourself this evening?" he inquired, when the dessert was placed upon the table and the domestics had withdrawn.

"I was thinking of passing an hour or two with Lady Lechmere," was the quiet response.

"But I thought you did not purpose to go out to-day?" said Curzon, regarding her furtively but with earnest attention.

"I meant that I was in no humour to take my usual airing in the carriage," observed Editha, glancing toward the timepiece on the mantel.

"May I accompany you to Lady Lechmere's?" asked the earl, as he helped himself to claret.

"What an idea!" ejaculated the countess, looking hard at her husband. Then, feeling convinced that he suspected nothing, so well did he dissimulate, she observed, laughing, "The world will fancy you have become quite uxorious all on a sudden. Besides, Lady Lechmere did not include you in the invitation she sent me this morning, for that note which I received when you were with me was from her."

"Well, I do not press it," said the earl, apparently quite satisfied. "Only I thought that as we have been a little more friendly to-day than for some time past, it would be as well if such a feeling were to continue."

"And who first destroyed that feeling?" asked Editha, with a slight accent of sarcasm in her voice.

"I must confess that I have not proved a model of a husband," said the earl; "but then there are allowances to be made. Remember the artificial state of society in which we live, move, and breathe, think of the temptations by which a man of my rank and position is inevitably surrounded —"

"Oh, I have not time to discuss the point with you now," exclaimed Editha, starting from her seat and laughing in a lively manner. "It is seven o'clock, and I must hurry away. But I shall cheerfully promote the friendly feeling which you say has arisen between us once more. So now adieu; I am off to North Audley Street," where, we should observe, Lady Lechmere resided.

"And I shall go and pass the evening with Leveson," said the earl, "or else with Huntingdon, if the marquis should not be at home."

The husband and wife both quitted the dining-room together. The former took down his hat from a peg in the hall, and sallied forth at once; and Editha, having seen him thus take his departure, ascended to her own chamber.

But the Earl of Curzon, instead of repairing to the Marquis of Leveson's, hastened to the nearest hackney-coach stand, entered a vehicle, and returned in it to the immediate vicinage of his own mansion. He ordered it to stop nearly opposite, as if waiting to receive a fare from the house at which it thus drew up; and remaining inside, he kept watch upon the door of his own dwelling. His wife's carriage was already there, and in a few minutes he saw the front door open. Then a female figure, enveloped in a handsome cloak, and with a thick veil over her face, descended the stone steps and entered the carriage, which immediately drove away.

Thrusting his head from the window of the hackney-coach, the earl directed the driver to follow the carriage at an easy distance; but when, in the course of a few minutes, he found that the equipage which he was pursuing turned into North Audley Street, he said to himself, "Well, after all, she is really going to Lady Lechmere's. Perhaps I have done her an injustice;" and yet the dark suspicion still remained in the profundity of his soul.

The carriage stopped at Lady Lechmere's; the hackney-coach halted a few doors off, and the earl again watched eagerly from the window. "Yes, she enters the house, and the carriage drives away," he muttered to himself. "I will now go and join the party at Lady Lechmere's, invent some excuse for following Editha after what she said upon the proposal I made to accompany her, and endeavour to

ascertain whether she expected to meet some particular individual there."

The earl was about to order the hackney-coach to drive up to Lady Lechmere's door, when the thought struck him that the course he was about to adopt could not possibly fail to be seen through by Editha. If she were really guilty, it would only serve to put her the more completely on her guard; and if she were innocent, he would be rendering himself supremely ridiculous in her eyes. No, he must continue to veil his suspicions, and watch her movements until he should either obtain substantial proof of her infidelity or else acquire the certainty that his fears were totally unfounded. Having thus resolved, he ordered the hackney-coach to take him back to Grosvenor Street; and alighting at a short distance from his dwelling, he dismissed the vehicle.

Consulting his watch by the aid of a door-lamp, he saw that it wanted twenty minutes to eight; and not knowing what to do with himself for the rest of the evening, he resolved to proceed to Lord Leveson's in Albemarle Street. But a sudden idea struck him. The fact was that his wife's principal lady's-maid, Gertrude by name, was a very beautiful young woman, with a voluptuous figure, a wanton countenance, fine teeth, and a pair of the most wicked eyes that ever sent forth flashing looks from pupils of the darkest jet. The earl had more than once flung furtive glances of deep meaning upon the captivating Gertrude; but she invariably appeared to take no notice of his amorous oglings. This bashfulness on her part, he felt assured, was only an affectation of strict propriety; and, being a very handsome man, as well as imbued with all the characteristic conceit, arrogance, and vanity of the order to which he belonged, he flattered himself that he had only to become more explicit in his overtures to achieve an easy triumph in that quarter. The opportunity and the humour now alike served admirably; his wife was from home, he was restless and uneasy, he wanted something to amuse and divert his mind, and he resolved to enter upon the conquest of the beautiful Gertrude forthwith.

Thus, only a few minutes after watching the movements of his wife, and still smarting with the suspicion of her infidelity, — an infidelity which, if brought home to her,

he was prepared to brand with all the ignominy of exposure, prosecution, and divorce, — this unprincipled aristocrat retraced his way homeward with the deliberate intention of seducing that selfsame wife's confidential attendant. But is this flagrant case an isolated one, or is it a mere type of man's too frequent conduct? Alas! yes; the husband may sin with comparative impunity, but if the wife, no matter how neglected and ill-used at home, yields to temptation, there is nought but the highest chastisement and most signal penalty for her. Truly, woman has her wrongs, which should engage the thoughts and enlist the sympathies of the philanthropist and moralist in this age when all the world is crying out for political and social reform.

The Earl of Curzon retraced his way homeward; but just as he arrived in front of his house, he beheld a female, dressed in the well-known apparel of Gertrude herself, ascending the area steps. Yes, it was her cloak, which he had often observed as becoming her so well, her bonnet, which he had frequently noticed as being worn so coquettishly. But a thick black veil was drawn over her countenance, — a modest precaution which all respectable and well-behaved young women of her class were wont to adopt in those times, when the streets were comparatively unprotected with the wretched guardianship of old watchmen, and when roistering blades and impudent gallants were accustomed to insult every woman whose unveiled features happened to please their fantasy.

" Gertrude, my dear girl," said Curzon, assuming his blandest tones, " where are you going ? "

But, instead of stopping, as the earl had hoped and expected, she brushed past him with evident indignation and hurried along the street. He was, however, almost immediately at her side again; and, in a voice of gentle remonstrance, he said, " Why are you so cruel? You know that I love you, Gertrude, — yes, ten thousand times better than I love your mistress; my looks must have told you so. Come, will you not speak to me, — not a single word? Throw up that veil, and let me see whether you are really and positively angry. I would wager anything that you are smiling with a delightful wickedness behind that thick screen. Gertrude, do you hear me? Surely you do not require so much coaxing? "

But, instead of making any response to this softly insidious language, she endeavoured to outstrip him; then, finding that he persevered in accompanying her, and evidently alarmed or else profoundly indignant at his importunities, she shrank against the wall as if about to faint.

"Good heavens, Gertrude!" exclaimed the nobleman, looking uneasily up and down the street, with the fear that they might be observed and that it would be supposed he was ill-using the female; "you cannot mean that you are really angry with me? Give me your hand, take my arm, and we will converse quietly and tranquilly as we walk along."

Thus speaking, he endeavoured to take her hand; but she withdrew it violently, a faint scream bursting from her lips at the same moment. The earl was astounded; he had not anticipated such opposition to his overtures. Suddenly the front door of the house opposite opened, and several gentlemen appeared on the threshold.

"For God's sake, come away with me, Gertrude!" said the earl, impatiently.

But she made a movement as if about to fly toward the gentlemen at the door opposite; and the earl, dreading the scandal of an exposure, beat a rapid retreat toward his own mansion, while the object of his importunity hurried away in the contrary direction.

Baffled, enraged, disappointed, and humiliated, the Earl of Curzon reëntered his dwelling; and after drinking a tumbler of claret to cool the throat which was parched with the fever of overwrought excitement, he flung himself upon a sofa and gave way to his unpleasurable reflections. Everything seemed to be going wrong with him; all circumstances were combining for his annoyance. His pecuniary affairs were in no agreeable position; he had failed to possess himself of Venetia, whose charms had well-nigh maddened him; the suspicion which he entertained relative to his wife was still strong enough to goad and torture him cruelly; and now the rebuff he had experienced from Gertrude crowned his humiliation and annoyance. He was just in that humour when a man would give anything to be able to vent his spite upon the head of some victim, either for a real or an imaginary offence.

Suddenly a thought struck him. His wife was from home, and Gertrude was also absent. The former would not, in all

probability, return until eleven o'clock or perhaps midnight; and the latter had no doubt received permission to pass the evening with her friends. What if the earl were to search in Editha's boudoir to see if he could discover the note which she had received in the morning, or any other letters that might afford a clue to her conduct?

Inspired with this idea, Curzon hastened up-stairs, entered the boudoir, and, closing the door, began to search all the drawers. He however discovered nothing of any consequence. Editha's writing-desk stood upon a table, but it was locked. He took out his own bunch of keys and tried every one of them at all corresponding with the size of the lock. The last key was found to fit, and the desk was opened.

One of the compartments was filled with letters, which the earl proceeded to examine with careful attention. But they were chiefly invitations to parties, communications from the female friends of the countess or from her sisters, or dunning applications from tradesmen. One note, however, somewhat puzzled the earl. It was from Lady Lechmere, dated about three months back, and running as follows:

"I have received your hasty note, my dear Editha, and send you back a reply by Gertrude. Yes, I will be at home all the evening, and will adopt the usual precautions. You have nothing to fear on that account. The servants shall receive orders to admit no one but the Countess of Curzon. But are you certain that you can trust the girl?

"Your affectionate friend,

"KATHERINE LECHMERE."

This letter, laconic though it were, was sufficient to strengthen the earl's misgivings. There was evidently some secret understanding between his wife and Lady Lechmere. What usual precautions were to be adopted? Why was there nothing to fear? And if the girl alluded to was Gertrude, wherefore should it be necessary to exercise caution in trusting her? Did Editha receive a lover's visits at Lady Lechmere's? If so, what meant the orders to the servants to admit no one but Editha herself? Lady Lechmere was a widow, and had neither brother, uncle, son, nor male cousin, residing with her beneath the same roof. Editha's lover, if she had one, was not therefore an inhabitant of the house;

and how could she go thither to meet him, since none but herself was to be admitted?

There was a deep mystery in all this; and the more profound the mystery, the stronger becomes the suspicion. So it was in the present case; and while completely perplexed by the ambiguous contents of the note, the Earl of Curzon nevertheless regarded it as an item of evidence against the countess. At all events, it was certain that whatsoever the secret might be, Gertrude was in the confidence of her mistress; but had he not mortally offended the lady's-maid by his conduct that evening, and could he hope to propitiate her in such a way as to lead her to divulge anything she knew?

Reserving this matter for after-consideration, the earl continued his search amongst his wife's papers. To his further surprise he presently discovered a bill of exchange accepted by himself. It was an old bill, which had been duly honoured by him on arriving at maturity; but it ought to be upon a file in his library, instead of in his wife's desk. It might, however, have come there by accident; and, after all, the incident was trivial in itself and could have no connection with the object of the search which he was instituting.

At the bottom of the desk he discovered a slip of paper, on which the name of " Curzon " was written several times. He examined the writing attentively, and soon saw that it was not in his own hand, as he had at the first glance imagined it to be. But the writing was evidently in imitation of his own, and a more minute inspection convinced him that it was Editha's. Had she, then, been practising his signature? It appeared so; but for what earthly purpose? The bill of exchange caught his eye; and it instantaneously struck him that she had surreptitiously possessed herself of it in order to copy his signature. Yes, this was now apparent enough; but again recurred the question, for what purpose had she done this?

There were no more papers to examine, and the earl returned all the letters and documents to the compartment of the desk whence he had taken them. The other compartment only contained writing-paper and sealing-wax. He locked the desk again, and, quitting the boudoir unobservedly as he had entered it, retraced his way to the dining-room.

CHAPTER III

THE BILLS OF EXCHANGE

At about a quarter-past eight o'clock Malpas and Mr. Emmerson entered Soho Square, and proceeded direct to the establishment of Mrs. Gale, who, previously informed by the colonel of the intended visit, was prepared to receive them. In fact, the colonel had been with her in the morning; and having found means to pay her the five hundred guineas owing to her, together with a handsome douceur by want of interest, he once more stood in her good books. For Mrs. Gale never cared what other people might think or say of a person, so long as she had reason to be satisfied with his conduct.

The colonel had told her in the morning exactly what he wished to be done in the evening, and Mrs. Gale had made arrangements accordingly. She now therefore conducted Malpas and Emmerson up into a suite of rooms which we must describe.

First, there was a handsome parlour, from which a little cabinet opened at the side with a glass door. This glass door had green blinds within, so that no one could see into it from the parlour; whereas a person stationed in that cabinet could easily observe, as he might also overhear, everything that took place in the parlour. Beyond the parlour itself there was a bedchamber, with a dressing-room adjoining.

Such was the suite to which Mrs. Gale conducted the colonel and the bill-broker; and the moment she had retired, Emmerson ensconced himself in the cabinet, taking the key with him and locking the door inside.

A few minutes afterward Mrs. Gale reappeared, introducing the Countess of Curzon, whom she ceremoniously assisted to lay aside her cloak and bonnet. The moment that the

woman had retired, Editha threw herself into the arms of the colonel and embraced him with the fervour of infatuated passion.

"I had some little difficulty in keeping this appointment which you gave me, my dear Percy," said the countess, addressing the colonel by his Christian name. "Would you believe that the earl was seized with quite an uxorious fit to-day, and actually wanted to accompany me to Lady Lechmere's? But no matter — "

"You look somewhat flurried, dearest Editha," observed Malpas, contemplating her with attention. "Has anything occurred?"

"Nothing of any consequence. I will tell you presently," interrupted the lady, as she sat down by his side upon a sofa. "But you must first explain why you wished to see me so very particularly this evening, as your note stated. You charged me to be sure and not disappoint you, Percy. And by the bye, when I think of it, the earl was with me when your note came."

"But he suspects nothing?" said Malpas, anxiously.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," replied the countess, emphatically. "Indeed, how can he? All our precautions are so excellently taken. But pray explain the urgent matter."

"You are well aware, dearest Editha," said Malpas, "that I am always longing to be with you, always unhappy unless in your society, and never happier than when clasping you in my arms. Therefore, it is not surprising that I should have been so urgent to meet you this evening, especially as some days have elapsed since last we met. But there was another inducement which prompted me to be so pressing with regard to an interview for this evening; in fact, I wished to have some serious conversation with you."

"What about?" inquired Editha, quickly; and her large black eyes were fixed with a sort of uneasiness upon the countenance of her paramour.

"Those bills, my dearest love," answered Malpas.

"Ah!" ejaculated the countess, becoming visibly troubled. "You surely do not require any more assistance in that shape?"

"Listen to me with patience for a few moments, Editha," said the colonel. "You are aware that I obtained the

money for those bills from a gentleman named Emmerson — "

"Yes, and my husband has likewise received money from that Mr. Emmerson," interrupted Editha. "He told me so this morning. But it was evident from his manner that he did not know you had been dealing with the same money-broker."

"He does not know it, Editha, — and very fortunate is it for me," added Malpas, with a profound seriousness of manner, "that he is thus ignorant."

"Of course it is, Percy," exclaimed the countess, "very fortunate for us both. If he knew that I had given the bills to you, he would, as a matter of course, instantaneously suspect that there is some very close intimacy between us. When you first communicated to me your extreme pecuniary embarrassments and stated that the earl had refused you the service of his acceptance to a bill of exchange, I told you that I could procure his name to a promissory note for my own use."

"And I promised you," observed the colonel, "that I would place that note in the hands of a gentleman who would advance the money upon it and not breathe a syllable to a soul relative to the transaction. I kept my word — "

"No doubt," interrupted the countess; "and you also undertook to provide the funds to redeem the security even before it should become due, so that the bill might not be presented to the earl at all; otherwise, if presented, he would of course see your name upon it."

"True, my dear Editha," said Malpas. "And you gave me several bills at short intervals, with the earl's acceptance to them."

"But I cannot see the utility of this recapitulation of circumstances so well known to both of us," observed the countess, with the glitter of uneasiness in her luminous eyes. "The whole matter is summed up in a few words. You were exceedingly pressed for money, and required a collateral security. All these things you explained to me, as I knew little or nothing about bills and promissory notes previously. I told you that I would undertake to wheedle the earl out of his acceptance, alleging that I required it to satisfy some pressing liabilities due to my jewellers and dressmakers. Knowing that the earl would not be in a condition to meet

the bill, I was obliged to assure him that one of my sisters had promised me a large sum of money in a month or two, and that I would provide for the bill by the time it should come due. This was the pretext; but in reality I relied upon your obtaining the requisite funds, and I sincerely hope you will be enabled to do so. Tell me, Percy, is there any doubt upon that point?"

"My dear Editha, I shall obtain the funds somehow or another," answered Malpas; "but that is not the immediate question. I am afraid that, prompted by your affection for me, and in order to save me from arrest and degradation at the time —"

"What do you mean?" inquired the countess, with all the petulance of intense uneasiness.

"I mean, dearest," answered the colonel, "that — but do not be offended — that your husband did not sign those bills."

"And what makes you think so?" demanded Editha, actually gasping with the vain and ineffectual efforts which she made to conceal her terror.

"Because Emmerson suspects something of the kind," returned Malpas. "He has compared the earl's signature with that upon the bills which I placed in his hands."

"O God! I am lost!" cried Editha, no longer able to keep down the effervescence of her harrowing emotions; and, covering her face with her hands, she burst into tears.

"Compose yourself, for Heaven's sake!" said the colonel. "Nothing is yet known. Mr. Emmerson is a gentleman and possesses a kind heart; everything can be repaired and remedied. Only do, I conjure you, my Editha, do tell me all the truth."

"But is it yet time to prevent this storm from bursting over my head?" she exclaimed, removing her hands from her countenance and gazing up piteously in the face of her paramour.

"There is time, I can assure you, Editha, — plenty of time," answered Malpas. "Do not give way to grief, which is now unavailing, but let us look the whole affair boldly in the face. Mr. Emmerson only requires to have the payment assured, and he will never breathe a word relative to the transaction. But pray tell me everything without reserve."

"I will," said the countess, endeavouring to compose her looks and her feelings. "You communicated your embarrassments to me, and I was distracted at the thought of seeing you borne off to a debtors' prison. I therefore resolved to adopt a desperate course in order to save you. And yet it neither seemed to me so desperate nor dangerous, after all; because, from what you told me, I understood clearly enough that if you provided the funds in time to take up the bills, the earl need never know that his name had been made use of at all. And that you would so provide the funds in due season I felt confident. Well, I obtained from the earl's file of papers an old bill which he had honoured some time since; and I imitated his signature, after some practice, to the best of my ability. You had previously told me that if I obtained his acceptance to the blank stamps, you would fill them up. Now, you must forgive me, my dear Percy," said the countess, in a tone of impassioned entreaty, "for I did all this entirely through devotion to you."

"Forgive you, dearest Editha!" exclaimed Malpas, much of whose enthusiasm of tone and manner was affected; "how can I do otherwise than forgive you? You have risked much — I do not think you are precisely aware how much — for my sake; and it is fortunate that we are in such hands as Emmerson's. He is a perfect gentleman, possessed of great influence in the City, and will soon be an alderman," added the colonel, sententiously; for he was making these remarks in order to propitiate the bill-broker whose close vicinage was so little suspected by the Countess of Curzon.

"It is indeed fortunate that the bills are in such hands," said the countess, now bitterly repenting the imprudence into which a passionate infatuation had betrayed her at the time. "But does he already know that you have received them from me?"

"I was compelled to confess the truth, Editha," replied Malpas; "or else he would have given me into custody on a charge of forgery."

"Ah! then you hesitated not to sacrifice my honour in order to save your own," ejaculated the countess, suddenly starting from the sofa, while the rich blood mantled in scarlet glow through the transparent duskiness of her skin.

"Pardon me, Editha," said Malpas, confused and humiliated; "but what could I do?"

"Risked Newgate, death, anything, sooner than betray the honour of a confiding woman," exclaimed the Countess of Curzon, fixing upon her paramour a look of withering scorn and superb contempt. "Did I risk nothing for you when I forged my husband's name to save you from a debtors' gaol? Have I risked nothing in giving you that love which could alone prompt me to such a perilous act? It was in a moment of utter contempt and indifference for all consequences that I became a forger; and that supreme recklessness was produced by my devotion to you. Now, sir, you have rewarded me by betraying my honour into the hands of an usurer."

"For God's sake, use no harsh words with respect to Emmerson," exclaimed the colonel. "Your honour is safe in his keeping, he will not betray you."

"Wretch!" ejaculated the countess, bitterly. "Much as I loved you a minute back, I now hate and detest you. Viper — would to heaven that I had the power of crushing you under my foot!"

"Editha, you are raving," cried Malpas, his countenance ghastly pale and his lips livid and quivering. "Do you intend to quarrel with me for ever?"

"My pardon you can never obtain, sir," answered the countess, haughtily. "If my heart were henceforth to feel one moment's tenderness toward you, I would stab it to the very core. But enough of this portion of the painful drama. One word more, and I take my departure. Am I to understand that you will arrange with Mr. Emmerson for these bills and that you will provide for them in due course? Or will you crown your infamy by suffering the transaction to reach my husband's ears?"

"I will provide for them — on my honour I will provide for them," exclaimed the colonel. "But hear me —"

"Enough, sir," ejaculated the countess, with imperious tone and haughty manner.

She took up her bonnet and cloak; he advanced, tremblingly and pale, to assist her in putting on the latter, but she repulsed him with a gesture of scorn.

He essayed to murmur a few syllables of abject entreaty, but she darted upon him a look that seemed fraught with

the scathing powers of lightning. A moment afterward, and she was gone.

Throughout this scene the bill-broker had remained a hidden but profoundly interested observer in the cabinet with the glass door. It was the first time he had ever seen the Countess of Curzon; and he was astonished as well as enraptured at the peculiar style of her loveliness. Her beauty appeared to him of the Mauritanian species which characterized the Moorish women who once made Spain their home, and the memory of whose charms has been preserved in many a tradition, legend, and romance. On throwing off the cloak which enveloped her entire person, Editha had appeared in a dark velvet dress, which seemed most befitting her complexion; and the admirable fashion of the costume set off the sculptural symmetry of her shape to its utmost advantage.

Then the power of her eyes, so luminous in their intense darkness, and so splendid with their long jetty lashes, the rich hue of the flush that so often mantled on her cheeks during the conversation with her now discarded paramour, the vivid red of those lips that were so delicious in their moist fulness and that seemed to breathe sweets even when the words that passed through them were sharp with scorn, the quick heavings of that bosom which the low-bodied dress left more than half-exposed, the grace, the elegance, and the dignity of her attitudes, all adapting themselves to the style of the discourse she was hearing or giving utterance to at the time, — in a word, every charm and every attraction that invested or surrounded her produced a powerful effect upon Emmerson.

She departed in anger, as we have already described; and then the bill-broker, unlocking the door, came forth from the place of his concealment.

"Now, Emmerson, are you satisfied?" said Malpas, still trembling beneath the influence of that withering, blighting, scathing look which Editha had last thrown upon him.

"She is the only woman I ever saw whose love is worth dying for," responded the bill-broker. Then, gazing upon Malpas with somewhat of that scorn and contempt which he had caught, as it were by transfusion from the noble lady who had just taken her departure, he said, "How feel

you now, colonel, after the closing scene in this drama, as the countess so appropriately styled it? "

"Whatever has happened, Mr. Emmerson," replied Malpas, moodily, "'tis you who have driven me to it. But now that you have heard my innocence proclaimed from the lady's own lips, now also that you know every minute detail of the entire transaction, what course do you propose to adopt? "

"I am not decided at present," answered the bill-broker. "You may, however, rest assured that I shall not take any step which may compromise the Countess of Curzon. But you will come to my office to-morrow morning and give me your own bill — mind, your own bill — for the amount which you owe me."

"I will be with you punctually at ten o'clock," said Malpas, deriving no small consolation from the manner in which Emmerson seemed disposed to treat the affair.

They then took their departure from Mrs. Gale's establishment.

Meantime the Earl of Curzon had been lounging in a restless manner upon the sofa in the dining-room in Grosvenor Street, or else pacing uneasily to and fro like a chafing lion in his cage; and every now and then he had recourse to the wine-decanter. But instead of soothing his agitated thoughts, the juice of the grape added an artificial stimulant to that natural excitement which was torturing him, and though his spirit was so restless, the time hung insupportably heavy upon his hands.

At length the timepiece upon the mantel struck eleven; and a few minutes afterward the carriage drove up to the front door of the house. The earl composed his features as well as he was able, and went out into the hall to meet his wife, for he felt anxious to have some conversation with her although he had not made up his mind what to say, or how to turn the wished-for discourse upon any topic which might suit his own purposes. But he was in one of those humours when a man of excitable temperament must have his say, even if for no other end than to pick a quarrel and find an issue for his pent-up spleen.

"I hope you have passed a pleasant evening," he said, accosting the lady, as she was hurrying through the

hall, enveloped in the handsome cloak and with her thick veil drawn over her countenance, just as he had seen her when entering the carriage at half-past seven o'clock. "Heyday! what does this mean?" he exclaimed, petulantly, as she swept abruptly past him, flitted up-stairs, and disappeared from his view all in a moment.

With another cause for ill-humour, he was returning to the parlour when the sounds of light footsteps and the rustling of garments met his ears; and looking around, he caught a glimpse of the cloak of the pretty lady's-maid, as the wearer was also hastening up the marble staircase. The earl hurried after her and overtook her on the landing.

"Gertrude," he said, catching her by the arm and speaking in a low, rapid whisper, "for Heaven's sake, do not mention to your mistress what occurred just now;" and as he uttered these words, he strove with piercing looks to penetrate the thick veil which was also worn by her whom he thus addressed.

But breaking abruptly away from him, and without a syllable of reply, she bounded up the next flight of stairs.

"Perdition seize the women!" muttered the earl to himself, as he slowly retraced his steps to the dining-room. "What the devil possesses them both? My wife sweeps past me in the hall as if I had the plague, and Gertrude breaks away from me on the landing as if contact with me were contagion. Then this mania of wearing their veils up to their very bedrooms, as if they dared not look a man in the face!"

And the earl walked to and fro in the parlour with uneven steps and agitated feelings.

He waited ten minutes in the hope that his wife would come down previously to retiring for the night; but as she did not make her appearance, he resolved to go up to her boudoir and either induce her to join him at the supper-table, or else remain and converse with her in her own room. But as he was ascending the stairs he met Gertrude face to face.

The beautiful girl had laid aside her bonnet, veil, and cloak, and she could not help encountering the earl's looks. A smile of ineffable archness and mischievous meaning appeared upon her pouting lips as she thus met his gaze; but she was hurrying past him when he once more caught her by the arm and held her firmly.

"You have not breathed a word to your mistress?" he said, in a hurried whisper.

"No, my lord, not a word," she replied, with a singularly wicked and roguish look. "But you deserve that I should have shown you no mercy after your rude treatment."

"I know you will pardon me, pretty Gertrude," he said. "But why would you not speak to me just now on the landing?"

"Why, my lord!" echoed the abigail; "because I heard other footsteps upon the stairs, — at least I thought so, — and likewise because I was afraid her ladyship would be angry with me for staying out so late. I was ordered to be home by half-past ten, and it was after eleven when I got back. The carriage drove up to the door just as I was descending the area steps."

"And where had you been, Gertrude?" inquired the earl, thinking that the lady's-maid was not so cruel, after all, inasmuch as she now conversed with tolerable freedom and apparent good-humour.

"I passed the evening with my parents, my lord," she replied, looking, however, as if she felt annoyed by the question; "and it was with the permission of her ladyship," she added, pointedly.

"Which is as much as to say that I have no right to inquire into your movements," observed the nobleman, affecting to smile. "Come, tell me candidly, are you very, very angry with me for my conduct of this evening?"

"Let me go, my lord, and I will tell you," said Gertrude.

"Now, then, you are free," observed the earl, as he let go his grasp on her arm.

The lady's-maid flung another look of unspeakable archness upon him, and flitted down the stairs with the speed and lightness of a spirit.

"The little minx!" muttered Curzon to himself. "But she is not quite such a prude, after all, and she shall yet be mine."

The little interview with the lady's-maid, being of a more satisfactory nature than his two former attempts to engage her in conversation, put the nobleman into a somewhat better humour, especially as he had received from her lips the assurance that his conduct was not reported to his wife. For, although he had not on previous occasions been equally

solicitous to veil his irregularities from her knowledge, he did not wish to appear ridiculous in her eyes as having met with so mortifying a rebuff from her maid, nor was he desirous that such a circumstance should reach her ears at the very time he was seeking for proofs of her own suspected infidelity.

One weight was therefore lifted from the earl's mind; and now, becoming capable of calmer reasoning than for the last two or three hours, he saw the impossibility of as yet making any positive charge against his wife, or of even alluding to Lady Lechmere's ambiguous note without admitting that he had searched the writing-desk in Editha's absence. Moreover, he had now hopes of winning Gertrude to his interests; and as she was evidently in the confidence of her mistress, it was important to glean from her lips those secrets of which she had a knowledge.

Such were the reflections which swept, all in a moment, through the mind of the earl, as he lingered upon the stairs after Gertrude had flitted away so abruptly; and no longer yearning to precipitate matters with Editha, he once more retraced his steps to the parlour.

Ringing the bell, he ordered the servant who answered the summons to inquire whether Editha was coming down to supper; and the response was to the effect that the countess had supped at Lady Lechmere's, but would join his lordship in a few minutes.

The nobleman therefore sat down to the repast, and his wife presently made her appearance, laughing and in the best possible humour.

"My dear Charles," she said, tapping him playfully upon the cheek as she passed behind him to take a chair, "you must have thought it very strange, very rude, and very unkind in me to hasten away so abruptly when you spoke to me in the hall as I came from the carriage; but I was labouring under a cruel misconception at the time. In fact, I heard it whispered at Lady Lechmere's, about nine o'clock, that you had just been seen at the Haymarket Theatre in company with a female of notorious profligacy. You may therefore conceive how annoyed I was. But I have just learned that you have been at home all the evening and therefore the accusation must have arisen in sheer wickedness or downright error."

" But who could possibly have told you such a thing? " demanded the earl, with mingled astonishment and indignation.

" Now I am not going to get you into a quarrel with any one," replied Editha, in the softest tone and the most caressing manner. " Besides, it was an elderly lady whom I overheard mentioning the circumstance to another antiquated gossip, and it was not intended for my ears. So you must ask me nothing more upon the subject. Suffice it to say that the imputation was a calumny."

" But if I had found Leveson at home and had remained to pass the evening with him," said Lord Curzon, " you would have believed the tale and fancied that I was really at the Haymarket with a bad woman? "

" The affair would certainly have looked suspicious," observed Editha; " but it only proves that we should never be hasty in judging from appearances."

" True," exclaimed the earl, struck by the observation. Then, after a few minutes' pause, during which he drank a glass of wine, he said, " It is a pity that husbands and wives ever keep any secrets from each other; the habit breeds distrust, and distrust embitters their existence."

" Are you going to turn over a new leaf? " inquired the countess, laughing gaily. " Your whole manner, conduct, and language to-day induce me to think so."

" But if I have my secrets from you, Editha," said the earl, attentively watching her countenance as he spoke, " have you none which you keep from me? "

" None, that may properly be called secrets," she replied, apparently with the utmost sincerity; and therefore the reader will perceive that she was as thorough a proficient in the arts of hypocrisy as we have already described her.

" I am glad of it, my love," exclaimed the earl, completely staggered by the candour of her response and the ingenuousness of her looks; and again he reflected upon her observation relative to the imprudence of judging rashly by appearances.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHANDLER'S SHOP

Mutton Hill is a small section of that large and loathsome neighbourhood which lies immediately behind the Sessions House on Clerkenwell Green. At the period of which we are writing, as well as at the present day, it consisted principally of second-hand furniture warehouses, old-clothes' emporiums, and shops devoted to the sale of sweet stuff, chandlery, shell-fish, coals and potatoes, and cheap crockery.

The chandler's shop requires especial attention. It was small, dingy in outward appearance,. and gloomy-looking internally. Over the door was painted, in little white letters on a black ground, the name of William Taggarty; and under this name, in smaller letters still, were the words, "Licensed Dealer in Tea, Coffee, Tobacco, and Snuff." The door which was half-glazed, usually stood open as long as it was light; but when evening began to draw in, it was closed, a tinkling bell being suspended above to give notice of the entrance of a customer. On a shelf, or ledge, which ran along the middle of the window, appeared an array of small glasses, containing brandy-balls, peppermint-sticks, bull's-eyes, hardbake, acid drops, barley-sugar, candy, horehound, lollipops, and other sweets of the same school of confectionery. On the board in the lower part of the window appeared bundles of fire-wood, Flanders' bricks, red herrings, a basket of eggs, a huge piece of Cheshire cheese, three or four ditto Glo'ster, some bottles of blacking, five or six bars of yellow soap, a few loaves of bread, a piece of bacon, a bladder of hog's lard, a box of "real Havanas" made of cabbage leaves, some jars of pickles, and a small box of starch. Suspended to the woodwork of the windows,

and dangling amidst the necessaries and luxuries just enumerated, were divers bunches of candles, — sixes, eights, middling tens, and farthing rushlights.

On the shelves behind the counter were a few canisters of tea and coffee, some jars of snuff and tobacco, and a miscellaneous assortment of tinder-boxes, tapes, laces, balls of cotton and worsted, papers of pins and needles, brushes, balls of twine, and " rounds " of matches with sharp yellow points looking like the beaks of callow birds, — " lucifers " not being invented in those times. The counter itself was furnished with drawers containing sugars of divers descriptions; and above it, to a horizontal beam, hung a further supply of candles, forming a thick fringe of tallow. At one end of the counter stood more loaves, a block of salt, a firkin of butter, and a tin treacle-can. Against the wall rested a nine-gallon cask of very small beer, with two or three measures in readiness to serve out the poor thin fluid; and in one corner of the shop was a group of mops, brooms, and brushes. A nest of little drawers, with the labels thumbed and fingered into perfect illegibility, but doubtless containing pepper, mustard, spices, and such like articles, was discernible in the other corner of this complete and interesting emporium of commerce.

The sole proprietor of the establishment was Mr. William Taggarty, as the name above the street door irrefragably proved. But who was the happy owner of so compendious an assortment of articles, or, as the brokers' advertisements in newspapers would have described it, this snug concern? We are bound, for truth's sake, to admit that the appellation of Taggarty was merely an assumed one for convenience' sake, and that the individual bearing it was none other than the Kinchin-Grand alluded to by Jack the Foundling in his conversation with Mr. Lawrence Sampson.

Behind the shop there was a small parlour, a very tiny place, just capable of holding a little round table and three chairs, and quite filled whenever those chairs were all occupied. If we look into this parlour at about nine o'clock in the evening, on the day after the occurrences chronicled in the previous chapter, we shall find Mr. William Taggarty seated in earnest conversation with Richard and Sarah Melmoth.

These two last-mentioned individuals have already been

described; it is therefore only necessary to observe that Taggarty was a man about thirty-five years of age, thin, with a sort of shopkeeper's stoop in his gait, and having a certain greasy appearance, as if his head were constantly coming in contact with the candles suspended over his counter, and his hands were being incessantly wiped upon his dingy apron.

Upon the little round table stood a bottle of gin and three glasses; for Mr. Taggarty was regaling his visitors, while discussing with them certain matters of importance.

"And so you are quite sure that Jack didn't peach agin the Hangman?" said Taggarty, as he refilled the glasses.

"I'm certain he didn't," replied Dick Melmoth. "He was staying with Larry Sampson at the time, as I've already told you."

"Then the more likely that he did blab," observed Taggarty.

"How the devil could he, when I tell you that none of us knowed anything about the matter until we saw it in the papers on Tuesday morning?" exclaimed Dick Melmoth. "Neither me or Sal was told of it beforehand, and therefore I'm sure Jack the Foundling wasn't. Mr. Coffin kept it precious close to himself, and had no assistants except the footman who was killed."

"Let me see," said Taggarty, in a musing tone, "it took place on Sunday night."

"Yes, and this is Friday," remarked Melmoth. "Jack the Foundling came home on Tuesday, as soon as he saw the affair in the paper. He sneaked away unbeknown to Larry Sampson; and the instant he came into the shop in Fleet Lane, he burst out crying, saying to Sal and me, 'You don't think I had any hand in this?' We knowed what he meant, for we had just been reading the account in the paper; and we told him at once that we didn't suspect him. He seemed quite cheered by that assurance."

"Yes, that he did," exclaimed Sal. "I'm sure he had nothing to do with it," and what with the effects of gin and grief, she began to whimper.

"Well, it's a bad business," said Taggarty, shaking his head. "And yet there's one consolation," he added, after a pause.

"What's that?" demanded Sally Melmoth, eagerly.

"Why, that a man who is drowned can't be hanged," replied the chandler, very seriously.

"Ah! well, so it is," observed the woman, also shaking her head. Then, having drained her glass, she continued, in a whimpering tone, "Poor Daniel's gone for ever! Who'd have thought that he was born to be drowned in the Thames? I'm sure I shall never drink another drop of that water as long as I live," she added; and thus speaking, she held out her glass for Taggarty to refill it with gin.

"But who could have peached?" said this individual, as he did the honours with the bottle. "You see that the constables were concealed already in the house at Richmond."

"Perhaps the footman himself had either repented, or else was a traitor all along," observed Dick Melmoth; "and may be that Mr. Coffin meant to shoot him, though the papers say he aimed the pistol at Larry Sampson."

"Well, that's likely enough," said Taggarty. "And now, what are you going to do? Shall you keep the shop open in Fleet Lane?"

"To be sure," replied Dick. "How the devil are we to live unless we do?"

"Ah! that's right," said Taggarty. "Don't go back to your old practices, unless it is in a quiet way; but, at all events, keep the shop as a blind. Look at me, my dear friends, I'm getting on well, and without no danger too. I keep my hands from wrongfully prigging; but if a feller brings in a cheese to sell, or a ham, or a bit of bacon, or what not, I don't ask any questions, but give him a trifle for the goods. He may have filched them, but no one can bring the thing home to me. Ah! them was rum times when we was all together at the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street, and when the poor Shickster was alive. Wouldn't she have been proud to serve behind that there counter in such a snug concern as this?" added the chandler, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the shop.

"Well, it is a nice place, so compact," observed Dick Melmoth, glancing around from the parlour toward the magazine of miscellaneous goods.

"By the bye," said Taggarty, "you haven't told me how Jack the Foundling was treated at Larry Sampson's."

"Oh, like a prince," answered Dick. "He says that he feels all manner of kind and grateful things toward Mr.

Sampson, and he was sorry to be compelled to leave him. But he couldn't stay after the business down at Richmond. He says that he knows Mr. Sampson only performed his duty in that respect; but still he had not the heart to remain with the man who may be said to be the cause of poor Coffin's death.

"Of course," observed Taggarty. "For if Sampson and his people hadn't been planted there, the Hangman wouldn't have run off and been drowned in the river. That's quite clear."

"Quite clear indeed," whimpered Sally Melmoth, again seeking consolation in the gin.

At this moment the shop-bell tinkled as the glazed door was opened by some one entering the place; and Taggarty, observing that it was no doubt some customer, hastened from the parlour, closing the door behind him. Immediately afterward, Dick and Sally Melmoth heard the outer door shut again also; then an ejaculation of amazement, bursting from Taggarty's lips, met their ears, and this was followed by some hurried and subdued whispering between that individual and the person who had just entered the shop.

"Something's going on," said Dick Melmoth, in a low voice, to his sister.

But before the woman could make any reply, Taggarty reappeared, followed by a man so muffled up in a great thick coat, a shawl neckerchief, and a slouched hat, that he was not immediately recognizable. But a presentiment of the truth flashed to the mind of Sally Melmoth; and starting at once from her seat, she exclaimed, "It's Daniel!"

"Yes, it's me safe enough," said the Hangman, in a surly tone, as he laid aside his hat and shawl neckerchief; then having submitted somewhat impatiently to the caresses of his paramour, who was quite maudlin with strong drink, and after shaking Dick Melmoth by the hand, he sat down between the astonished pair.

Taggarty hastened to bolt the street door; then, returning into the parlour, he poured out a tumblerful of gin, which he handed to Coffin, who at once partook of a deep draught.

"Well, I suppose you're rather surprised to see me," said the Hangman, gasping with the effects of the potent fluid which for nearly a minute took away his breath. "No doubt

you thought I was dead and gone? I've seen the newspapers, and find that the belief is I was drowned. Well, so much the better. But it's a precious bad job, after all."

"Bad indeed," observed Sal. "I suppose you won't be able to come home again in a hurry?"

"I don't see how the deuce I'm ever to come home again at all," replied the Hangman, his countenance assuming an expression of diabolical ferocity, as if he thought the whole world had turned against him. "There's only two chances for me, and they're not likely to come about."

"What are they?" inquired the Melmoths, speaking, as it were, in the same breath.

"Why, one is the death of Larry Sampson," answered Coffin; "because if he was out of the way, the other constables could be easily bought over to say they couldn't identify me as the burglar. I know 'em all well enough to be aware of what a ten-pound note would do with each."

"And what is the other chance?" inquired Taggarty.

"Why, if there's somebody to be hung and no one to hang him, some fine morning," returned Coffin, "a free pardon for any past offences would be offered to the individual that would take the place of the executioner; and then I might come forward and step easy enough into my old berth. Those are the two chances; but they're far away off at present, and no mistake."

"Less probable things have come about," observed Taggarty.

"Well, we shall see," said Coffin. "Where's Jack?" he demanded, abruptly.

"At home again," answered Dick. "You don't suspect him at all?"

"Not a bit of it," rejoined the Hangman. "He wasn't aware that such a thing was in contemplation at Richmond at all. But I can guess how it was. Me and the footman — poor fellow! — was foolish enough to discuss our plans one night last week in a tap-room at Richmond, where a country bumpkin was getting his supper. We thought he went to sleep after he'd gorged himself with bread and cheese; but he must have shammed, and so overheard what we said. It was infernally stupid on our part; it's cost the poor devil of a footman his life, and made me a sort of exile and wanderer

like Cain. Perdition take the whole business!" added Daniel, with savage earnestness.

"But what have you been doing all this time?" asked Dick Melmoth; "and how did you manage to escape drowning?"

"Oh, the tide carried me ashore a little way lower down than where I jumped in," responded Coffin; "and then I cut across to Beechey Manor, — you know the place," he observed, with a significant glance at Dick Melmoth. "There I've been hiding until now; but I got so deuced tired of living cooped up in a small bedroom, and the two old servants have shown so much uneasiness at my presence, that I could endure it all no longer. So I got this thick coat, this broad-brimmed hat, and that shawl neckerchief of the old fellow, and resolved to come and pay my friend Bill Taggarty a visit. If you two hadn't been here by accident, I should have got Bill to run down to Fleet Lane and fetch you up to meet me. So now you know all about it."

"But what are you going to do, and where do you mean to live?" asked Sally Melmoth.

"Well, I haven't exactly made up my mind," returned Coffin. "You must continue at the shop, and let people fancy you still believe me to have been drowned. I have got plenty of blunt, that's one good thing; and it's fortunate it was all in gold, or else the soaking I enjoyed in the Thames would have spoilt flimsy-notes beyond all redemption. Perhaps I shall stay with Bill Taggarty for a time; he's all alone in this house — ain't you, Bill?"

"Yes, I'm all alone," was the chandler's response; but it was given with an evident aversion to the proposed sojourn of the Hangman at his house.

"Or else I shall go over to Bencull's crib at the Folly Bridges," continued the Hangman, not choosing to observe the disinclination of Bill Taggarty to harbour him as a guest.

"Hark!" said the chandler, abruptly; "there's a knock at the street door."

"And rather an impatient one, too," added Daniel Coffin, rising from his seat with evident trepidation. "I mustn't be seen here by anybody, Bill, you know."

"Then just step up-stairs along with Sal and Dick," said Taggarty, opening a door and thus disclosing a flight of

narrow steps formed, as it were, in a recess. "It may be some one that I must see, and you'll be more quiet up in my bedroom."

The Hangman took up his hat and neckerchief, Sally Melmoth possessed herself of the gin, and Dick laid hands on the glasses; they then all three hastened up-stairs, Taggarty shutting the door behind them. He then proceeded to open the shop door, and the rays of the candle which he held in his hand fell full upon the countenance of Mr. Larry Sampson.

The first and most natural thought which instantaneously flashed to the mind of Taggarty was that the Bow Street officer had traced the Hangman thither and was come to arrest him; and the chandler's looks accordingly grew troubled, for he felt that he was suddenly involved in no small danger for harbouring the delinquent.

"Good evening, Mr. Taggarty," said Sampson, in his usual quiet manner, and not appearing to notice the confusion of the chandler. "I want to have a little conversation with you if you are disengaged."

"With me, sir?" exclaimed Taggarty, flinging a rapid glance into the street and experiencing some relief on observing that the officer was apparently alone, or at all events had not a posse of constables at his back. "With me, sir?" he repeated, in a less incoherent manner.

"Yes, upon no professional business, however," replied Larry, emphatically; for he failed not to observe that his presence was very far from welcome.

"Walk in, sir, walk in," said Taggarty, endeavouring to look as composed and unconcerned as possible; and, having shut and bolted the door again, he conducted the officer into his little parlour. "Pray sit down, Mr. Sampson; let me take your hat; there, make yourself at home, sir. And now, shall it be gin, rum, or brandy?"

"Neither, thank you, Mr. Taggarty," was the response. "I hope I am not intruding upon you at this moment, but you appear to be all alone."

"Oh, yes, quite alone, Mr. Sampson," replied the chandler, but with just a sufficiency of lingering uneasiness to throw some doubt upon the assertion; and as he glanced mechanically toward the door of the staircase, Sampson at once perceived that, although the chandler might have been alone

in that room, he assuredly was not alone in the house previous to his (the officer's) arrival.

"I want to speak to you upon a very particular and important matter," said Larry, in a low and confidential tone, — "a matter which, if you can serve me in it, will put a hundred guineas into your pocket."

Taggarty instantaneously thought within himself that Sampson wanted him to betray Daniel Coffin into his hands; and his mind was at once made up not to have anything to do with an affair that would inevitably bring all the Hangman's confederates and accomplices, from every part of London, like a hornets' nest, about his ears. He accordingly said, "If it's any dirty work, Mr. Sampson, I sha'n't do it."

"I do not think you will look upon it as dirty work at all," responded the officer, still speaking in a low and guarded tone. "But tell me frankly whether we can converse in this room without the chance of being overheard."

"Well, there's a young 'oman of my acquaintance upstairs, doing out the bedchamber," answered Taggarty, "and if she listens, she may overhear us."

"Then will you step around with me to the nearest public-house?" asked Sampson.

"The truth is, I am expecting a friend or two," replied the chandler, "and I can't very well leave. But just say in a whisper what the business is about."

"It is relative to a lad called Jack the Foundling," rejoined the officer, looking Taggarty very hard in the face.

"And what about him?" asked the latter, eagerly.

"That is just the question which I am going to put to you," said Larry. "Now, I want to ascertain all the particulars I can possibly glean concerning the infancy of that lad; and if you will assist me, there are a hundred guineas in my pocket at your service."

"A hundred guineas?" repeated Taggarty, his eyes brightening. "I must sell a great many pen'northe of tea and slices of cheese to scrape that sum together. Well, sir, what is it you wish to know?" he asked, in a very subdued voice.

"I am already aware," responded Larry, "that a great mystery envelops the birth of the lad. He was either found or stolen; and it was a boy called James Melmoth who took him, when a babe, to the den in Grub Street,

whence you have derived your nickname of the Kinchin-Grand. I also know that the present Richard and Sarah Melmoth, who have been living with the deceased Daniel Coffin, are the brother and sister of that James Melmoth of whom I have spoken, but who has long been dead. I am moreover aware that your late mistress, Shickster Sal, brought up the Foundling."

"Then, if you know all this, Mr. Sampson," said Taggarty, "what more can you expect to glean from me?" and the chandler now felt easier in his mind, because he saw, from an observation just made by Larry, that he really supposed the Hangman to have been drowned, and that consequently his visit to Mutton Hill at such a moment was purely an accidental coincidence.

"I expect to glean from you any additional information which you may be enabled to impart," said Sampson. "In the first place, endeavour to recollect the precise date on which the babe was brought to the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street."

"It was the 1st of June, 1795," answered Taggarty.

"How do you recollect the date so well?" inquired Larry Sampson.

"Because I remember that it was the day before James Melmoth's father murdered Sir Richard Stamford in Windsor Park, and then blew out his own brains," was Taggarty's response.

"It was not known for some time afterward that the assassin of the baronet was the same wretched man whose previous enormities had so horrified the metropolis."

"But I knew it was the same man," observed Taggarty, in a scarcely audible whisper, "because his son, young James, told me so at the time. Afterward I mentioned the circumstance to my pals, it got talked about, and this was the way the public at length knew that James Melmoth, senior, was the assassin of Sir Richard Stamford."

"Now, was not the babe stolen by that man and his son James?" asked Sampson.

"He was," replied Taggarty. "I don't see any harm in telling you the real truth now."

"Certainly not. And it was in Hyde Park that the babe was thus stolen?"

"It was. But you seem to know all about it," said the

chandler, in surprise. "Yet I do not see how you can possibly have learned this; for I have never divulged the secret until now. Neither Dick nor Sal Melmoth knew so much about the business. They were children at the time it happened; but their eldest brother James made me his confidant to a certain extent."

"Did he tell you whose child it was?" asked Sampson.

"No. He had sworn a most solemn oath to his father not to reveal the secret of the child's parentage until it was at least twelve years of age."

"Do you know why the Melmoths stole the child?" demanded Larry.

"Because they had some dreadful spite against its parents, I believe. But you are perhaps aware that young James Melmoth died a violent death within a few days after his father's suicide; and thus in the interval he had not much leisure to be overcommunicative with me."

"Is this all you know?" inquired Larry Sampson. Then, seeing that Taggarty hesitated, he produced a bag of gold and counted down a hundred guineas upon the table, saying, "If you can give me any further proofs relative to the circumstances of which we have been speaking, this sum is yours."

"Stop a moment," observed Taggarty. "If the Foundling should turn out to be the son of wealthy or great folks, how do I know but what I shall get into trouble for having been a sort of accessory to the harbouring of him after he was stolen?"

"I will give you a written guarantee that no harm shall befall you," replied Sampson.

"Your word will do, sir," rejoined the chandler. "And now I will fetch you the only proofs that I can put into your hands, but they will no doubt be found convincing enough."

Having thus spoken, Taggarty rose and ascended the staircase, shutting the door carefully behind him. On entering the bed-room up-stairs, he found the Hangman, Dick Melmoth, and Sally engaged in earnest conversation together upon their future plans and proceedings under existing circumstances; but they were all astounded and alarmed when the chandler informed them that his guest was none other than the terrible Lawrence Sampson.

In a few hurried words, however, and in a whispered tone, Taggarty explained to them the object of the officer's visit, whereat they were profoundly surprised; but the chandler did not vouchsafe to inform them that Sampson's liberality had extended to a hundred guineas. He was afraid they might claim shares, the matter having reference to the Foundling, in whom they were all interested. He therefore coolly and quietly suppressed an 0, thus reducing the reward from 100 guineas to 10 guineas.

Having given these few hurried explanations, he unlocked a drawer, took out a brown-paper parcel, and was about to descend to the parlour again when Daniel Coffin clutched him abruptly by the arm, saying, in a hollow whisper, " Bill, are you man enough to do me a service? "

" What do you want? " asked Taggarty, recoiling, with an instinctive shudder; for the Hangman's meaning flashed in a moment to his comprehension.

" Larry Sampson is below," replied Coffin, " and those who might have seen him come in won't be waiting to observe if he ever goes out again," he added, with a look of diabolical significancy.

" No, no, I couldn't do it, Dan'el, I couldn't do it," answered Taggarty, his countenance becoming pale as death, and his knees trembling under him.

" Coward! " ejaculated the Hangman, with bitter ferocity, as he pushed the chandler away from him. Then, instantly observing the malignant expression of vindictiveness which appeared upon Taggarty's countenance, he said, " Come, don't be angry, Bill, I didn't mean it. But you must make allowances for one placed in such an infernal predicament as I am."

" Yes, pray don't think any more of it, Bill," said Sally Melmoth, in a tone of earnest entreaty; and Dick also endeavoured to propitiate the chandler.

" You needn't suppose I should betray you, Dan'el," observed Taggarty.

" But will you help me to — to — "

" To make away with Larry Sampson? No! "

And with this emphatic reply, the chandler quitted the room.

Descending to the parlour, he again carefully closed the door of the staircase behind him, and resuming his seat,

he opened the brown-paper parcel. But his hands trembled visibly, and his cheeks were also still pale and ghastly from the mingled sensations excited by the scene that had just occurred in the bedchamber above. Larry Sampson, upon whose keenness even the least perceptible emotion was never lost, could not fail to observe an agitation so marked as this; but he affected not to notice it, while all the time he was wondering what could have produced such an impression upon the Kinchin-Grand, and who the person or persons might be that had so produced it.

"What have you got there, Taggarty?" he inquired.

"The clothes the Foundling had on the day he was stolen and brought to the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street," was the answer. Then, as Taggarty proceeded to open the parcel and display its contents, he said, "Here's the hat and feathers, the little frock, all covered with neat braiding, somewhat faded now notwithstanding, and here's the petticoats, the little socks, and the tiny shoes. I've always kept them things by me through every wicissitude; for somehow or another I thought they'd be of service sooner or later."

"You have acted well and wisely," said the officer. "Take the hundred guineas, and I shall keep these things. I suppose you meant me to do so?"

"By all manner of means," replied Taggarty, as he tied up the parcel again. "And now, Mr. Sampson, won't you take a drop of summut short?"

"I would much rather not, thank you," returned Larry. "Good night."

The chandler, having hastily gathered up the money and consigned the coin to his pocket, proceeded to unfasten the shop door to let Mr. Sampson out; and as soon as the officer disappeared, he shut and bolted it again.

But Larry did not immediately quit the neighbourhood. He was resolved to wait and see who the person or persons might be that were secreted in Mr. Taggarty's upper room. His mode of action was decisively determined on, and promptly carried into execution. Entering the shop of an old-clothes dealer, to whom he was well known, he remained there only five minutes, and issued forth again completely metamorphosed from head to foot. In fact, he was apparelled as an old woman, with a dark brown cloak, and the

hood drawn over his countenance, which was further shaded by a dingy cap having an enormous frill. He carried a bundle of matches in his hand, and in this disguise posted himself exactly opposite the door of the chandler's shop.

Nearly an hour passed, and no one came forth. But several halfpence were thrust into Sampson's hand by poor working men and their wives returning home, and who took him to be an aged beggar-woman. He was sorry thus to receive the donations of humble charity; but he could not refuse them, for fear of exciting suspicion and perhaps leading to detection and disturbance.

Time passed on, midnight was proclaimed by the iron tongue of Clerkenwell Church, and still Larry stayed at his post. He would have remained there till morning if necessary; but observing no lights in Taggarty's bedroom, he felt assured that the chandler had not as yet retired to rest. Presently the shop door opened, and Taggarty himself appeared upon the threshold, looking anxiously up and down. Sampson, in a whining voice, besought charity; but the chandler, taking no heed of the prayer, retired into the shop. Immediately afterward a woman came forth as far as the threshold, and also looked intently up and down the narrow street. A light from an opposite window gleamed upon her countenance, and Sampson had no difficulty in recognizing Sally Melmoth.

She retired into the shop, the door of which still remained open; and in a few minutes Dick Melmoth, whom Larry also recognized, came forward with the evident object of ascertaining if the coast was clear. Sampson saw that something strange was going on; but of what it was he had not the most distant suspicion. He nevertheless determined to ascertain the point, if possible, and was rejoiced that he had thus kept watch upon the chandler's premises.

Dick Melmoth having retired again as the others had done, there was another pause in the proceedings; and then, at the expiration of about two minutes, a man hurried forth and sped down the hill toward the Sessions House. He was muffled in a great thick coat, wore a broad-brimmed hat, much slouched over his features, and all the lower part of his face was concealed in a thick shawl neckerchief.

"Do, dear sir, for the love of Heaven, bestow your charity on a poor old woman," said Larry Sampson, with

the piteous whine of mendicancy, as he passed close up to the side of the man.

"Get out, you old crone!" growled the fellow, his eyes glaring savagely from beneath the broad-brimmed hat; and, thus speaking, he bolted around the corner, passed behind the Sessions House, and gained Turnmill Street.

For the first time in his life Larry Sampson was thrown quite aback for the moment. His purpose was so far answered that he had succeeded in catching a glimpse of the man's features; but his amazement may be understood when he found that the muffled individual was none other than Daniel Coffin the Hangman. The unmistakable tone of the voice simultaneously confirmed the fact; and if further proof were wanting, it was at once seen in the circumstance that Dick and Sally Melmoth were at Taggarty's when he issued forth, and that such care had been taken to ascertain that the coast was clear for his exit thence.

Speedily recovering his self-possession, however, Larry Sampson instantaneously revolved in his mind the difficulties of his position. His first impulse was to fling off the old woman's garb and hasten in pursuit; but a rescue was certain to be effected in that vile neighbourhood the instant the alarm of "an officer" should be raised. Moreover, the disguise would be found, Coffin would hear of it and suspect who the old beggar-woman was, and, perceiving that his existence was known, he would either double his precautions against discovery, or else leave the country. On the other hand, to retain the disguise and pursue him in it would only be to attract certain attention, without frustrating the chances of Coffin's rescue or escape. Sampson therefore retraced his way to his friend the old-clothes dealer, laid aside the cloak and cap, and proceeded homeward, with the intention of losing no time in setting a watch upon all the places and neighbourhoods where the Hangman was likely to conceal himself.

CHAPTER V

THE JOURNEY TO PARIS

Let us now return to Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen, who had embarked at Woolwich on board a revenue cruiser, to be conveyed to France. They were attended by an elderly gentlewoman who served as a sort of duenna, or guardian, and who had long been intimate with Mrs. Owen, the young ladies' delectable mother. She was a widow, her name was Ranger, and, having no ostensible means of income, was very glad to make money by any means, no matter what intrigue or machination might be involved in the service entrusted to her.

She was not, however, entirely in the secret of the young ladies' mission to the Continent. She knew that they were to enter the household of the Princess of Wales; she was likewise well aware that the royal princes had for some time past been frequent visitors at the mansion at Richmond; and her idea of female virtue was not of such an exalted character as to induce her to suppose that a mere platonic friendship had subsisted between the Misses Owen and the voluptuary sons of George III. The construction she therefore put upon the matter was that the young ladies, having bestowed their favours upon the princes, were rewarded by obtaining, through their indirect influence and recommendations, lucrative posts in the household of the Princess of Wales.

Mrs. Ranger herself was the most plausible woman in existence, though in reality a perfect Hecate of iniquity. She was indeed ten thousand times worse than Mrs. Owen suspected her to be. This lady fancied that she was merely an astute, clever, and shrewd woman, not overparticular how she made money nor in what service she was enlisted,

but fully trustworthy by an employer; whereas Mrs. Ranger was in reality a thoroughly unprincipled, artful, and abandoned wretch, capable of selling the charms and making a market of the young girls confided to her care. She had smiled inwardly when Mrs. Owen, on giving her last instructions, had enjoined her to keep a careful watch over the virtue of her daughters; but externally she had assumed a matronly and duenna-like air, confirming with the most sacred assurances the impression which this staid and cautious aspect had left upon the mother's mind.

Her personal appearance was as false as her mind. She used cosmetics with so elaborate a skill and so ingeniously supplied the faded charms and wrinkled deformities of nature with the succedaneous remedies of art, that her withered form assumed a buxom shape and her countenance bore a richer bloom than ever had clothed it even in the springtide of her youth. She was midway between fifty and sixty; but what with false hair, false teeth, and the various artificial appliances alluded to, she managed to pass herself off as at least ten years younger.

It will be remembered that Mary Owen had withdrawn herself from any further share in the secret conspiracy hatched under royal auspices against the honour, happiness, and even life of the Princess Caroline of Wales. Agatha, Emma, and Julia accordingly embarked without their youngest sister at Woolwich, under the protection of Mrs. Ranger. As a matter of course, they were accompanied by no end of trunks, bandboxes, and packages, for, as the reader has already been informed, large sums were expended in giving the young ladies a handsome equipment for their new career. A government vessel had been appointed to convey them to Calais, — for the power of steam was not in those days applied to navigation, and the ordinary means of reaching the Continent was by sailing-packet or hoy from Dover.

We should here pause for a moment to observe that this was the epoch of Napoleon's memorable abdication of the imperial dignity in France, and his retreat to the little sovereignty of Elba. Louis XVIII had been restored to his throne, an infamous Bourbon being thus given back to France; peace prevailed in Europe, and numerous English

tourists were taking advantage of the cessation of hostilities to visit the Continental countries.

The voyage from Woolwich to Calais was performed in about thirty hours, with a calm sea, but a wind not altogether favourable. Mrs. Ranger was so ill, notwithstanding the smoothness of the passage, as to be compelled to keep her berth the whole time; but during daylight the three sisters remained upon the deck, conversing gaily and affably with the officers belonging to the vessel. On arriving at Dessin's hotel at Calais, the party was compelled to make a halt for a couple of days in order to enable Mrs. Ranger to recruit herself thoroughly ere she entered upon the formidable task of posting to Paris.

It was on a Wednesday afternoon that the Misses Owen and their duenna embarked at Woolwich; it was on the Thursday evening that they reached Calais, and it was not until Sunday morning that they proposed to resume their journey. Now, if the reader will refer to earlier chapters, he will find that it was on the Friday Jocelyn Loftus bade adieu to Louisa, with whom Mary Owen remained, at Canterbury; and we must add that it was on the Saturday that, having crossed in the sailing-packet from Dover to Calais, he also took up his quarters at Dessin's hotel.

We must remind our reader that this amiable, intelligent, and excellent young gentleman, ere setting out on his chivalrous enterprise, had pledged himself to Mary Owen not only to compromise her sisters as little as might be in the task he had undertaken, but also to use every attempt to persuade them to withdraw from the execrable service in which they were engaged. It was therefore his settled intention, on setting out upon his journey, to overtake them as speedily as possible, endeavour to form their acquaintance, and become their travelling-companion if opportunity should serve. For the further development of his plans he naturally trusted to circumstances and to the chapter of accidents; but he was resolved to leave no stone unturned in order to rescue the Misses Owen from the abhorrent influences that now ruled their career, or, at all events, warn the Princess of Wales of the snakelike perils and insidious snares that were scattered in her path.

On arriving at Dessin's hotel late on Saturday evening, and on making inquiries of the waiter as to whether certain

ladies had passed that way within the last day or two, Jocelyn was well pleased to learn that they were actually at the moment beneath the same roof. He also ascertained that they were to leave in a post-chaise on the following morning for Paris. He then asked whether he also could be accommodated with a travelling chariot at about the same hour; but he learned to his mortification that in consequence of the great influx of English visitors during the week, every disposable chaise and carriage in the town had been put into requisition, and that the one kept for Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen was the very last which could be obtained. There was, however, the chance of return-carriages arriving; and the waiter confidently promised one for the Monday.

Jocelyn, however, assured him that it was of the highest importance for him not only to depart on the following morning, but also to travel on to Paris without delay, and hence his desire to obtain a post-chaise instead of proceeding by the diligence, or stage-coach. The waiter looked at the young gentleman very attentively; and suspecting that he wished to become the travelling-companion of the ladies, he adroitly hinted that such was his belief. This hint was given with the unmistakable manner of one who indirectly and covertly proffers his assistance to forward the design into which he penetrates; and Jocelyn, knowing the readiness of waiters in general, and French ones in particular, to perform such little services, at once said to the man, " Ten louis shall be your reward if you can induce those ladies of whom we have been speaking to accommodate me with a seat in their post-chaise."

The waiter spoke not a word, but with a significant look quitted the apartment. It was time to serve the ladies' supper; and as he attended upon them at the repast, Mrs. Ranger enjoined him to have the chaise in readiness at nine in the morning. He promised due observance of her command; and as she spoke French with fluency, — as indeed did Agatha, Emma, and Julia, — she made many inquiries about the condition of the roads, the probable state of the weather, the best hotels to stop at, and the chances of travellers being assailed by robbers. The waiter responded to all these queries satisfactorily enough, except the last; and, with a considerable amount of apparent hesitation, he observed that the recent disbanding of a large number

of the troops had thrown many desperate characters idle upon the world, that there were certainly cases of travellers being stopped, — he was not even sure but that the outrages sometime occurred in the broad daylight, — and that, at all events, it was much safer and more prudent for ladies to journey with a male protector.

These remarks, cunningly dropped, and instilling fear rather by innuendo than positive averments, produced the desired effect upon the ladies. Mrs. Ranger declared that she would much prefer the diligence to a post-chaise; Agatha would not hear of the stage-coach, but regretted that " mamma " had not provided them with a male attendant; Emma sided with Mrs. Ranger relative to the propriety of travelling by the diligence; and Julia at once expressed a wish that they were acquainted with some gentleman who could accompany them. It was now that the waiter, as if struck by a sudden recollection, " took the liberty of observing that there was an English gentleman at that moment in the hotel, who was most anxious to travel post to Paris, but who could not obtain a conveyance; " and then, as if quite in a style of indifferent comment, the astute *garcon* continued to remark that " the young gentleman was certainly the handsomest, most agreeable, and most fascinating specimen of English travellers that had visited the hotel since the peace."

All this was quite enough to enlist the interest of the ladies on behalf of one who was so much pressed for the means of rapid conveyance to Paris; and, moreover, they wanted a travelling-companion. Julia thought there could be no harm in offering their fellow countryman a seat in their chaise; Emma expressed her opinion that it would be rude not to do so; and Agatha still more emphatically insisted upon the propriety of asking him to join their party. Mrs. Ranger, said, in a bland tone, that she saw no objection, provided he was a real gentleman; and the waiter's guarantee being taken in this respect, the said waiter was duly and formally charged to conduct the negotiation.

Accordingly, this important plenipotentiary, doubtless fancying himself no mean imitation of the astute diplomatist Talleyrand, returned to Jocelyn's sitting-room; and the moment he made his appearance, his looks proclaimed the

success of his enterprise. Loftus was well pleased thereat, and cheerfully paid the promised fee of ten louis, which the waiter still more joyfully consigned to his pocket.

Jocelyn then retired to his bedchamber, and soon fell asleep, to dream of his beloved and lovely Louisa; while, on the other hand, Mrs. Ranger and her three fair charges sought their own apartments, well pleased with the prospect of an agreeable travelling-companion during their journey to Paris.

On the following morning Mr. Loftus received an invitation to breakfast with the ladies; and he was forthwith conducted to the room in which they were assembled. At the first glance which he threw upon Agatha, Emma, and Julia, the sentiment of mingled pity and indignation was deepened in his soul to think that such beautiful creatures should have become entangled in such detestable intrigues. He was, however, far from suspecting that beneath the air of lively, good-tempered artlessness which was natural to them, and which corrupting influences had not as yet materially impaired, there lurked all the nascent tendencies and inclinations toward that thorough depravity which the denizens of fashionable life are so skilled in veiling with smiles, affability, and the glitter of fascinating manners, — as the hideousness of a corpse may be concealed with flowers. He believed them to be the unconscious and beguiled victims, rather than the now willing instruments, of the vilest machinations; and little suspecting that even their very maiden virtue and personal chastity had been sacrificed in the course of execrable training which they had undergone, he hoped to rescue them from the ways of intrigue and dishonour, and render them worthy, as they were certainly brilliant, members of society.

Such were the thoughts which swept through the mind of Jocelyn Loftus on his introduction to the Misses Owen; but as for Mrs. Ranger, he experienced a thorough and unmitigated contempt for her ere he had been three minutes in her society. Not that he at once saw into the depths of her character; but he read enough, through the veil of plausibility wherewith she invested her words and her manners, to assure himself that she was false, hollow-hearted, vain, and cunning. This feeling of dislike he however studiously concealed; for it by no means suited

his purpose to make an enemy of that lady at the very outset of their acquaintance.

The impression which his own appearance produced upon the ladies was at once of the most favourable character. His exceedingly handsome person, endowed with all the beauty and graces of youthful manhood, his elegant manners, the tones of his voice, and the unaffected yet fascinating style of his conversation and choice of language, could not fail to prove agreeable to an old coquette and three lively, animated, and impassioned girls. He was accordingly received with an evident welcome, whose warmth was only subdued by that habit of external formality which was rather practised from the ceremonial usages of drawing-rooms than really felt in all its rigid reserve.

The conversation at the breakfast-table was sprightly and sparkling; but the meal was somewhat hurried, as the chaise was announced to be in readiness even before the party sat down. Then came the hurry and bustle of the preliminaries for departure; but as Jocelyn attended to the disposal of the luggage, a world of trouble, as Mrs. Ranger observed to the girls, was fortunately taken off their hands.

French travelling-carriages, or *berlines*, are spacious and commodious vehicles, containing six persons inside without the necessity of much crowding. There was consequently ample room for the whole party. Mrs. Ranger and Julia occupied the back seat; Jocelyn was placed between the two elder girls on the front one. He had Agatha on his right hand, and Emma on his left; but though in such charming contact, his heart wavered not in its allegiance to the loved and absent Louisa, and he felt that it never would. Much rather would he have been at this moment with his betrothed; but he had undertaken a certain duty, and his present position was only one of the inevitable phases of that enterprise in which he had so generously and chivalrously embarked.

The equipage rolled out of the courtyard of Dessin's hotel, the drawbridge of the ramparts was crossed, and the vehicle, drawn by four horses with two postilions, entered on the broad road leading to Boulogne. Mrs. Ranger now thought it high time to let Jocelyn know that her three fair charges were proceeding to Italy in order to enter the service

of the Princess of Wales; whereupon the young gentleman observed that he also was bound on a visit to the same sunny clime, giving his hearers to understand that his was a tour of recreation and pleasure, although in the first instance he had some important business to transact in Paris.

The eyes of the young ladies shone with unmistakable joy when they thus heard that their new acquaintance was proceeding all the way to Italy; and Mrs. Ranger inquired how long he purposed to remain in the French capital. He answered that a couple of days would suffice for the business which he had to conclude in that city; whereupon Agatha remarked how singular it was that they also intended to limit their halt in Paris to an equally brief period. The observation was too significant not to be seized upon as available for Jocelyn's purpose; and he expressed a hope that he might be permitted the honour of escorting the ladies as far as their destination in Italy. The proposition was received with many expressions of gratitude and much evident delight; but Jocelyn was somewhat surprised, as well as secretly vexed and annoyed, when he observed that Agatha, the eldest sister, gazed upon him with a certain subdued tenderness as she breathed her thanks for the proposal he had just made.

He could not even help looking earnestly at her for a moment in order to assure himself that he had rightly interpreted the meaning of her gaze; but as her eyes fell beneath his own, and a fleeting blush appeared upon her cheeks, he fancied that he must have been deceived, and regretted having thus regarded her in a manner which she might consider as savouring of rudeness or impertinence. But as the conversation turned upon different topics, it became clearly apparent that she had taken no offence; for she treated Jocelyn with a friendly but well-bred courtesy, as much as to imply that since it was agreed they were to be travelling-companions on a very long journey, there was no necessity to regard each other as the mere acquaintances of a few hours. At least, such was the interpretation which the young gentleman now put upon her demeanour, as well as on the bearing of her two sisters and Mrs. Ranger; and as it was his object to gain the good opinion and the confidence of the three girls as speedily as was practicable

under the circumstances, he of course encouraged all their friendly advances.

Thus by the time the party reached Boulogne to lunch, the ladies were already on very good terms with their handsome travelling-companion; and when they stopped in the evening to dine at Bernay, it would have seemed as if they had been acquainted for a whole year instead of a single day. Indeed Jocelyn was more than once inwardly and secretly vexed at the somewhat meaning looks of tenderness which Agatha cast upon him; but as those sidelong and furtive glances were instantaneously withdrawn when she saw that they were noticed, he tranquillized himself with the hope that any feeling which the young lady might have so suddenly conceived toward him would not be conveyed by a more marked demonstration.

After dinner the journey was resumed toward Abbeville, where it was proposed to rest for the night. The sun sank into its western home, and obscurity veiled the road which our travellers were pursuing. Mrs. Ranger got nervous about robbers, upon the chances of an attack from whom she would nevertheless persist in talking, while Julia, already much wearied, dozed by her side. Jocelyn sustained the conversation with the old lady and Emma; but Agatha had gradually ceased to take part in the discourse, and soon became altogether silent.

It was very dark inside the vehicle, and Jocelyn soon experienced a new cause for annoyance. For while he was endeavouring to reason Mrs. Ranger out of her fears, which, whether affected or not, seemed to be augmenting, he felt Agatha's head gently droop upon his shoulder. It was true that she had on a plain travelling-bonnet, so that the silk material alone came in contact with him; but still his extreme sense of propriety made him shrink from anything that appeared to approach an undue familiarity. He nevertheless fancied that she must have fallen asleep, and therefore had unconsciously lain her head upon his shoulder; and as the circumstances of travelling may in such cases somewhat mitigate the strict observances to be followed on ordinary occasions, he made due allowances for the present little incident and offered not to disturb his fair companion.

But in a few minutes he felt her head gradually moving; then it became still again, and then she suddenly but noise-

lessly turned in such a way that her cheek rested against his own. He started, but not enough to compel her to shift her position; and then astonished that she did not, he gently drew back, so that while his face no longer touched her own, her head nevertheless remained upon his shoulder. Mrs. Ranger ceased talking at the moment, and he listened attentively to ascertain whether Agatha was sleeping or not. But her breath came not as from the lips of a sleeper; and shocked at an occurrence which he was now forced to regard as a deliberate, intended, and most indiscreet proceeding, if not a positive overture, on her part, he drew still farther aside. Agatha thereupon abruptly raised her head, and gave vent to an ejaculation as if just awaking from a doze.

Jocelyn was now again bewildered, and in deep perplexity what to think. After all, she might have really been sleeping, though he fancied she was not; and, prompted by his generous nature to put the most charitable construction upon the deeds of his fellow creatures, — unwilling, moreover, to be precipitate or rash in attributing aught savouring of gross indelicacy to a young and gay-hearted girl, — he brought his mind to settle the point in her favour. Still, when he reflected upon all that Mary Owen had told him, his misgivings were again aroused; and the painful conviction was forced upon him that the training to which the unfortunate sisters had been subjected by their unnatural mother was indeed sufficient to destroy all their moral principles, even if its effect had not as yet been to ruin their chastity.

But while Jocelyn was thus painfully giving way to his meditations, and almost regretting that he had joined the company of the ladies, he soon became sensible of another source of vexation. For be it observed that, in consequence of occupying a place in the carriage between Agatha and Emma, while he was withdrawing himself from the contact of the former he was unconsciously pressing against the latter. Then, as he drew more and more away from the eldest sister in the manner already described, his pressure against Emma became all the closer. This circumstance he did not immediately perceive in the confusion of his ideas; but to Emma that pressure appeared full of a tender meaning. She felt his form coming in nearer contact with her own, and a thrill of pleasure shot through her entire

frame. But still she stayed perfectly still, in a tantalizing uncertainty as to whether the occurrence were accidental or not. In a few moments the pressure against her grew more apparently decisive, and the wanton blood now coursed like lightning through Emma's veins. Jocelyn's left arm pressed against her bosom, which heaved and swelled to a contact which she believed was intentional; and with a voluptuous ardour she pressed against him in return. At that instant was it that Agatha raised her head and gave vent to an ejaculation as if she were starting from a doze, and then the pressure between Jocelyn and Emma suddenly ceased.

But still the impression remained in Emma's mind that the occurrence which had just taken place was deliberate and intentional on Jocelyn's part, and she waited a few minutes in the anxious hope that the presumed demonstration of tenderness would be continued. It was not, however, for Agatha was now lounging back in her own corner, and Loftus was no longer inconvenienced for room. Emma therefore gently and gradually pressed toward him, now pausing for the tacit response so anxiously awaited, then pressing closer still, until the contours of her well-developed bust heaved amorously against his arm. All in a moment the truth flashed to Jocelyn's mind, once more he started abruptly, and the second temptress as abruptly shrank back into her own corner, complaining of the ruggedness of the road and the jolting of the carriage.

Almost immediately afterward the vehicle entered Abbeville; and in the bustle occasioned by the examination of the passports at the town gates, the arrival at the hotel, the handing the ladies out of the carriage, the duty of looking after their luggage and his own, and then the task of giving orders to the waiters, etc., in the excitement of these manifold proceedings, we say, Jocelyn for the time lost sight of the previous topic of his unpleasant meditations.

Almost immediately after their arrival at the inn, the ladies withdrew to the chambers prepared for them, and Loftus was equally ready to seek repose. Before he, however, fell asleep, the behaviour of the two eldest Misses Owen recurred to his memory; and it was while still perplexing himself with arguments for and against a deliberate intention on their part that slumber visited his eyes.

When the travellers were reunited in the morning at the breakfast-table, neither Agatha nor Emma appeared in any way confused on meeting his looks, nor was their behaviour at all changed toward him, unless indeed it were that their tone and manner increased in friendliness. But there was no evidence of humiliated feeling on their part, as if they were conscious of having made overtures which were met with a tacit rebuke.

The journey was resumed, Mrs. Ranger and the youngest girl occupying the same seat as before, and Jocelyn being again placed between the two eldest sisters, with their backs to the horses. The young gentleman now endeavoured to turn the conversation upon the Princess of Wales, observing how harshly she had been treated by her royal husband, the prince regent, and regretting, if it were only for the sake of their child, the Princess Charlotte, that they did not effect a reconciliation and live together. But he found the three sisters very guarded in their replies and still more sparing in their comments, while Mrs. Ranger, who had passed a bad night, dozed in her corner of the carriage. At length Agatha, with an appearance of natural liveliness and versatility of disposition, exclaimed, "Let us talk of something else, for this is an old and hackneyed topic amongst us," and Loftus was accordingly compelled to turn the discourse into another channel.

He found the three sisters well informed, accomplished, and intelligent; their good-humour was patent beyond the possibility of affectation; they did not indulge in scandal, nor frivolous disquisitions on dress, nor were they at all vain of the intimacy which they had enjoyed with the royal princes. They possessed many excellent qualities, it was clear; but how far their morals had been depraved and their principles undermined, Jocelyn trembled to conjecture. When, however, he thought of the admirable purposes to which their minds and their dispositions might have been trained under proper tutelage, and when he reflected that whatever might be their failings and faults, these poor girls could scarcely be held responsible for them, his heart was moved to the deepest commiseration, and he felt that it would be a glorious triumph to rescue them from the evil influences that were hurrying them on to destruction.

The party stopped to dine at Beauvais in the afternoon,

and in the evening at Beaumont, to take an early supper. The journey was then speedily continued; and once more did the shades of night envelop the landscape in obscurity, and plunge the interior of the carriage into almost utter darkness. Jocelyn actually drew himself into as small a compass as possible, so as not to encroach in the slightest degree upon the space allotted to his fair companions on the same seat; but he soon became aware of certain little tacit overtures from either side, — a pressure of the knee against his own, or the heaving of a bosom against his shoulder. He felt that his position was alike false and ridiculous; and he became dispirited and even gloomy. He was surrounded by temptations which he had ample strength of mind and rectitude of principle to resist; and yet he had embarked in an enterprise which compelled him to remain in this very position and subject to these temptations. That the little overtures, sly, artful, and tacit as they were, were intentional and deliberate, he could no longer doubt; and it became a question whether he was not compromising himself too far, and entering upon the verge of outrage against the pure love which he felt for Louisa Stanley, by remaining any longer in the company of these sirens whose temperaments were evidently so warm and whose morals were becoming every instant more open to the gravest suspicion.

Finding that they received no encouragement from the young gentleman, Agatha and Emma presently desisted from their tacit approaches and silent demonstrations of tenderness toward him. The discourse grew languid, and soon dropped altogether, every one, save Jocelyn, falling off into a doze. But he himself continued to meditate upon the perplexing situation in which he was placed; and there were but two alternatives for him to choose between. He must either withdraw himself from the company of the siren sisters, and thus break the promise he had pledged to Mary that he would endeavour to rescue them from their present career; or he must remain with them, even at the risk of encountering overtures which pained, insulted, and shocked him. In the former case, he would have nothing more to do than hasten on to Italy and give the necessary warning to the princess, leaving the three sisters to fulfil their ignoble destiny; in the latter case, he might perhaps

find speedy opportunities of conversing with each one alone and separately, and thence judge whether the work of reform were really practicable in reference to them, or whether they were trammelled and ensnared by circumstances and influences beyond all hope of redemption.

Jocelyn decided upon the adoption of the latter alternative of the two which we have named; at all events, he determined to see what results the couple of days' sojourn together in Paris would produce.

It was eleven o'clock when the post-chaise entered the French capital, and it proceeded straight to Meurice's Hotel, which was in those times situated in the Rue St. Honoré. Wearied and exhausted with the long journey of two days, Mrs. Ranger and the three sisters lost no time in seeking repose; but ere Jocelyn retired to rest, he sat down and penned a long letter to his well-beloved Louisa, for he felt a profound longing thus to commune with the dear one, by committing to paper all the tender things and fond assurances which he would have breathed in her ears had they been together.

CHAPTER VI

FASHIONABLE DEPRAVITY

Mrs. Ranger and Julia occupied the same sleeping-apartment at the Hotel Meurice, while Agatha and Emma shared another.

The chambermaid had been ordered to rouse them at nine o'clock in the morning; and accordingly, if we peep about half an hour later into the chamber tenanted by the two eldest sisters, we shall find them in the midst of the avocations of the toilet.

"Now what think you of our handsome travelling-companion, Mr. Jocelyn Loftus?" inquired Agatha, as she combed out her long brown hair before the immense mirror in which her whole person was reflected, as she stood with naked shoulders and bare bosom in an attitude of indescribable voluptuousness and unstudied grace.

"I think that he is the handsomest young man I ever beheld in all my life," answered Emma, who was lacing on her corset in front of another mirror which reproduced with equal fidelity all the rich contours and fine proportions of her own softly sensuous form.

"But what else do you think of him, Emma?" inquired her eldest sister.

"I scarcely know how to answer you," was the response.

"Should you like to have him as a lover?"

"Yes, but not as a husband."

"And wherefore not as a husband?" inquired Agatha.

"Because I think he is too particular. He seems a very moral young man," returned Emma, laughing.

"Ah! have you been tempting him, then, you wicked girl?" asked Agatha, also smiling roguishly.

" Have you? " demanded Emma. " Come, let us confess. You and I have no secrets from each other."

" I hope not," observed Agatha. " Well, I am bound to admit that the contact of his handsome person did somewhat confuse and bewilder my ideas and excite my passions — and — and — I suffered him to perceive that he was not displeasing to me. In plain terms, I laid my head upon his shoulder, — this was in the evening of the first day's journey."

" And did he reward you with a soft and noiseless kiss? " asked Emma, her bosom heaving visibly in the mirror where it was reflected, and the soft flush of desire tingeing her cheeks.

" On the contrary, he seemed either not to understand my meaning or else to be indifferent," answered Agatha. " Nay, I am not quite sure that he did not positively repulse me, but very gently, and rather by withdrawing himself from me than by pushing me from him."

" Oh, he withdrew, did he? " exclaimed Emma, a light breaking in upon her mind. " Then did I fall into a most egregious error, for as he retreated from you he pressed against me, and I fancied that the pressure was intentional."

" And you returned it? " said Agatha, in a voice full of deep sensuousness, for the bare idea of these amorous overtures heated her blood and inflamed her imagination, so that the carnation deepened upon her cheeks, her hazel eyes swam in liquid languor, and her fine bust swelled and sank like the undulating motion of the sea.

" I returned that pressure, — in fact, I gave Jocelyn Loftus to understand precisely what you did," said Emma, in response to her sister's question. " I let him know as plainly as I dared that if he were bold and venturous, I should not prove timid nor cruel."

" And the result? " exclaimed Agatha, hastily.

" The same as in your case," was the reply.

" Last evening, in the carriage, I renewed my little artifices," observed Agatha, " and with an equal futility. When we descended from the carriage and entered the room where the lights were blazing, I scarcely dared look him in the face; but I was resolved not to seem humiliated."

" That was precisely the feeling which I experienced," exclaimed Emma. " But do you think that Jocelyn is a

perfect anchorite, or that he rejects our overtures because he is smitten with Julia? "

"I scarcely know what to think," responded Agatha. "But I do not fancy that he is inclined to pay any particular attention to Julia; and as for a young man of two or three and twenty years being an anchorite, is not the most probable theory to fall back upon. He may possess very lofty notions of honour."

"He evidently does possess them," observed Emma.

"And is therefore loath to engage in an intrigue with young ladies who are to a certain extent under his protection," added the eldest sister.

"Very likely. Or else he is afraid of that old harridan Ranger," suggested Emma.

"Far from it," exclaimed Agatha. "He experiences for her the most sovereign contempt, although he endeavours to conceal it. But I have marked the curl of his beautifully chiselled lip — oh, what classic lips! "

"And such a faultless Grecian face, with that clear, rich brown complexion," observed Emma. "His hair, too, is magnificent, dark as jet and as glossy as a woman's. Then his teeth — yours and mine are not whiter nor more even."

"And that is paying ourselves a compliment at the same time," said Agatha, laughing so as to display the rows of pearl which shone between her red and juicy lips. "But did you ever behold such splendid eyes as Jocelyn's? Ah! when I think of that fat, puffy, bloated prince, and then fix my thoughts upon Jocelyn, it seems as if I had submitted to the pawings of a great imp and now vainly sigh for the embraces of an Apollo."

"Nor can I reflect lovingly upon the Duke of York's image," said Emma, "when that of Jocelyn is uppermost in my mind. I wonder whether Julia is smitten by him, and whether she thinks of her Duke of Cumberland in contrast with our handsome fellow traveller. And yet," exclaimed Emma, suddenly laughing gaily and turning toward Agatha, "it is not every trio of sisters who have had three princes as their lovers — "

"And paramours," added the eldest girl; then, with a subdued sigh, she observed, in a tone that altered strangely all in a moment, "Do you know, Emma, I am very much afraid — "

" Oh, I can guess what you are about to say," exclaimed Emma, with a subdued shriek and look of dismay. " Heavens! is it possible? "

" I am afraid so," replied Agatha, mournfully. " But do not speak so loud, do not give vent to ejaculations; we may be overheard. And when I think of it, don't mention it to Julia; for should my fears prove correct, the fewer confidants the better."

" How in the name of Heaven will you manage, my dear girl? " inquired Emma, still contemplating her sister with mingled anguish and dismay.

" Oh, if it be really the case I can conceal the fact for a long time to come," answered Agatha; " and then I must trust to circumstances to point out the means of avoiding eventual discovery. It is not so difficult on the Continent as it is in England to manage these matters; midwives are more accomplished in France and Italy — and also more knowing and less scrupulous," she added, with a significant look.

" I understand you," observed Emma. " But — "

" Do not let us talk any more about it now, my love," said Agatha, suddenly brightening up. " If the worst comes to the worst, the prince regent must support his child, — for his it assuredly will be. You know, Emma, that I have never as yet yielded to the embrace of any other."

" And the prince must know it likewise," was the response. " For my part, I should be fearfully shocked and alarmed if I thought that my amour with the Duke of York was likely to bring me into disgrace."

" And yet you are ready to plunge headlong into an amour with Jocelyn Loftus," exclaimed Agatha, laughing, for the natural gaiety of her disposition soon returned.

" Ah! but he is so very handsome! " murmured Emma, with a deep sigh of mingled pleasure and ardent longing. " It is, however, quite clear that we cannot both win him to our arms, — to one only must the triumph and the happiness belong."

" Let me have a fair opportunity of plying him with the artillery of my fascinations," said Agatha; " and if I discover that his heart is proof, I will abandon him to your seductive wiles."

" Agreed! " exclaimed Emma. " And after all, even

supposing that you should be in the way to become a mother, it is much better to make up one's mind to lead a life of pleasure and gaiety, especially as we cannot hope to make very excellent marriages; for our reputation has been assuredly damaged by our intimacy with the princes."

"And therefore," added the eldest sister, with the coolness of settled depravity, "if we have the character of being no better than we should be, let us also have the enjoyment."

"Upon that point, Agatha," observed Emma, "you and I have already agreed; otherwise we should not be discoursing so confidentially, so unreservedly, and so frankly as we are doing now. But to return to the handsome Jocelyn, what opportunity do you require, and how can I succour you?"

"Contrive to get Mrs. Ranger and Julia to accompany you shopping this afternoon, if possible," replied Agatha; "and I will remain indoors with Jocelyn. He will not offer to escort you if you expressly say you are going out shopping."

"Leave it to me," said Emma. "I suppose that after breakfast we shall all sally forth in company to see the lions; then we shall return to luncheon."

"And afterward I shall feel too tired to go out again before dinner," observed Agatha. "As for Mrs. Ranger, I am very certain that instead of standing in the way of an intrigue, she would wink at it, — especially if a few guineas were slipped into her hands. Oh, I have fathomed that woman's character far more deeply than our mother has done."

"But mamma is very credulous in some things," observed Emma, "although so very astute and cunning in others. The idea of throwing us constantly in the way of the princes, and expecting that we should pass with impunity through the fiery furnace."

"It was most preposterous," exclaimed Agatha. "But here is Julia."

"What! not dressed yet?" cried this young lady, as she entered the room. "I have been up for the last hour, and should have come to chat with you if that dreadful old creature, Mrs. Ranger, had not kept me to help her put herself together. I never knew such a painted sepulchre as she is, — such a made-up specimen of self-modernized antiquity. But, by the bye, I have not until now had an opportunity

of asking you both what you think of our travelling-companion? "

"That is the very subject we have been discussing for the last hour, Julia," replied Agatha. "We both consider him uncommonly handsome, agreeable, and fascinating. Indeed, for myself, I infinitely prefer him to the Prince of Wales, Emma likes him much better than the Duke of York — "

"And I now regard the Duke of Cumberland as a perfect orang-outang of ugliness in comparison with this Adonis of a Jocelyn," observed Julia, with a gentle sigh.

"Has he exhibited any tenderness toward you? " inquired Agatha.

"Not the least," she answered, in surprise at the question. "What made you think so? "

"Because he has rejected certain little overtures which Emma and I have made toward him," responded the eldest sister; "and therefore we fancied that he must either have experienced a preference for you, or else must be proof against our witcheries altogether."

"What! a handsome young man feel no passion! " exclaimed Julia; "and three pretty girls unable to thaw the ice of his heart. It's too absurd."

"So we think," rejoined Agatha; "and therefore we are going to lay siege to him in our turns. I first, Emma second, and you third, Julia, if we fail."

"Be it so," said the youngest of the three sisters.

And after this delectable conversation, they descended to the sitting-room, where Jocelyn was already seated, deep in the perusal of a French newspaper. Mrs. Ranger shortly made her appearance; and during the repast the plans of the day were settled. It was arranged that immediately after breakfast they should all proceed together to visit some of the principal buildings, that they should return to luncheon at three, that in the afternoon those who had purchases to make should go out shopping, and that in the evening the whole party should visit some theatre.

Jocelyn had been in Paris before, as had also Mrs. Ranger; they were consequently well able to conduct the young ladies to all the most remarkable sights in the French metropolis, and a few hours were thus passed agreeably enough. They returned to Meurice's shortly after three

o'clock; and during lunch-time Emma inquired who proposed to accompany her on a visit to the milliners', jewellers', and other fashionable repositories. Mrs. Ranger was of course indispensable to such a tour, which required her knowledge of Paris, and Julia was prompt in giving an affirmative answer. But Agatha, pleading a slight headache, expressed her intention of remaining indoors until the evening; and Jocelyn said not a word. He was, however, well pleased at thus finding an opportunity of discoursing alone with one of the sisters.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia went up to dress again; and Agatha inquired gaily whether Mr. Loftus meant to stay and keep her company. He replied that he proposed to do himself that honour, and Agatha turned suddenly away to conceal the flush of mingled joy and sensuous anticipation which she felt burning upon her cheeks. Observing that she must leave him for a few minutes, in order to help her sister Emma at the afternoon's toilet, she hurried from the apartment.

"Jocelyn will remain with me," she said, in a tone of triumph, as she entered the chamber to which Emma had preceded her. "And now, then, let me make the most of the charms which Heaven has given me."

She selected a dress which, without being too fine or in any way gaudy, was of surpassing elegance; and being made after the most approved fashion of the day, it was cut so low in the body as to leave the shoulders entirely bare and reveal so much of the bust that the imagination had but little trouble in filling up the remainder of the glowing picture. She was not above the middle height, though a little taller than Emma; but there was more dignity in her gait than in that of her sister, and the statuesque carriage of her neck and shoulders gave her bosom, naturally fine, the grandest development. This she knew full well; and hence her selection of a dress which displayed her charms to the most voluptuous advantage. But she threw over her shoulders a gauze kerchief, thus flimsily veiling the beauties which, with all the accomplished artifices of coquetry, she really intended to be seen.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia sallied forth together, and Agatha returned to the sitting-room, where Jocelyn had remained. The moment she made her appearance in

that seductive manner, her aim and object flashed to the mind of Loftus; and, though his looks betrayed not his sentiments, he inwardly experienced a mingled pain and disgust at this too brazen evidence of a deep depravity. For an instant he was inclined to abandon the self-imposed task of reforming the three sisters as utterly hopeless; but then the feeling of pity for their unhappy destiny returned to his soul, and, likewise remembering his pledge to Mary, he resolved to prosecute an undertaking which was nevertheless accompanied by so many incidents that shocked his upright character and wounded his generous heart.

Throwing herself with a voluptuous negligence upon a sofa, she darted a look all vibrating with desire upon Jocelyn Loftus, who, taking a chair near her, paid no attention to the studied but apparently involuntary display of charms and fascinations, the artillery of which was now directed against him.

"Miss Owen," he said, in a calm but serious voice, and without looking at her, "I purposely sought the opportunity of this interview."

"Indeed!" she murmured, her heart suddenly beating with transport at what she instantaneously took as an avowal, and which seemed at the moment to promise her a far more easy victory than she had expected; and the colour came and went in rapid transitions upon her very beautiful countenance.

"I have behaved with some little duplicity toward you," continued Loftus, still keeping his eyes averted; "but the moment for serious explanation is now come."

"And why should they be so serious?" asked the young lady, in a low and tremulous tone the tenderness of which at once struck Jocelyn and convinced him that his prefatory remark had been entirely mistaken.

For suddenly turning his eyes, in mingled amazement, pity, and pain, upon Agatha, he saw that the kerchief had fallen away from her shoulders, and that she was leaning toward him with all the nude display of her luxuriant charms and with a profound wantonness in her looks.

"Miss Owen," he at once exclaimed, turning aside with an impatience almost amounting to disgust, "let us understand each other. It is purely and simply upon a matter of business that I propose to address you; and the explanations

I have to give are of a very serious character, I can assure you."

"But I am in no humour for serious discourse, Mr. Loftus," said Agatha, in a tone of vexation; and as the blood rushed to her cheeks, she bit her lip nervously.

"When I tell you, Miss Owen, that I am acquainted with your sister Mary," observed Jocelyn, "you will perhaps condescend to listen to me."

"Ah!" ejaculated the young lady; and, the keenest interest being suddenly excited in her mind, she mechanically drew the kerchief over her shoulders, as if abandoning, at least for the moment, her wanton designs upon Loftus.

"Yes, I have seen Miss Mary Owen," he continued, "and she has told me all — everything. It was by no accident that I fell in your way at Calais, and that I became your travelling-companion to Paris. I purposely sought the opportunity to form your acquaintance, in the hope of being enabled to point out to yourself and your two sisters the lasting dishonour that will attach itself to your name if you persevere in the course where the most fatal influences have placed you. For if you regard the matter in its true light, you will perceive — you cannot fail to understand, indeed," he added, emphatically, "that you are taking part in a shocking conspiracy to ruin the peace and destroy the character of a lady who has never injured you. I allude to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales."

"Heavens! that little traitress, Mary, has indeed betrayed us," cried Agatha, now seriously alarmed, and totally losing sight of all the sensuous thoughts which a few minutes before were uppermost in her imagination. "But where is she, Mr. Loftus? How came you to fall in with her?"

"The day after she quitted you at Woolwich, Miss Owen, did I encounter your unhappy sister in the streets of London; and you may rest assured that she is not only in a place of safety, but also in honourable companionship. I am comparatively a stranger to you," added Jocelyn, with some little significancy; "but I leave you to determine whether from the first moment of our acquaintance, the day before yesterday, you have seen aught in me that would warrant a suspicion against my principles and my honour. I am young," he continued, "perhaps too young to undertake

a portion of the task which I have imposed upon myself, and which is the awakening of yourself and your sisters to a sense of the enormity of that service wherein you are embarked. But I cannot think, no, I dare not entertain so vile an opinion of human nature as to suppose that you will designedly, deliberately, and systematically undertake the ruin of a princess who has already suffered so much. I beseech, I implore you, Miss Owen, to weigh the matter well, to pause, to reflect, to decide on the score of justice, honour, and humanity. You have not yet compromised yourself too deeply to withdraw from this atrocious service. Pardon me for using harsh terms and strong language; but my indignation will not permit me to speak in a milder tone."

"What do you advise, what do you wish, Mr. Loftus?" asked Agatha, nervously excited and scarcely knowing what she said.

"If you would abandon the service in which you have embarked," exclaimed the young man, enthusiastically, "I would love you as a sister."

"Ah! that is but, after all, a cold expression," murmured Agatha, with a tone and look of reviving tenderness. "There are perhaps terms on which I might listen to you, there is a language you might adopt that would prove irresistible — "

"Oh, do not talk to me thus, Miss Owen," exclaimed Loftus; and as he turned his eyes reproachfully upon her, he observed that her own were swimming in a soft, sensuous languor and that she was again performing the part of a siren-temptress. "I will not affect to misunderstand you, because it will only be prolonging a topic that is unfit for us both. Know, then, that I love and am betrothed to a young lady whose image is never absent from my mind, a being endowed with every virtue, and the purity of whose soul shall never be outraged or shocked by any word or deed on my part."

"You are the most admirable preacher I ever heard out of a pulpit, Mr. Loftus," said Agatha, in a voice of bitter irony; but instantaneously recovering her wonted good-humour, she observed, "If you fancy that I hoped to inveigle you into a marriage with me, you are much deceived. But you spoke of loving me as a sister — "

"I meant that if you would adopt a course worthy of a high-spirited and humane woman," interrupted Loftus,

"I should experience that admiration, should feel that friendship — "

"Which would doubtless be eminently flattering to me," added the young lady, in a tone of good-tempered sarcasm. "But if I give you no satisfactory assurance on that point?" she said, inquiringly.

"Then I shall have no alternative but to hasten on to Italy and warn her Royal Highness of the perils and the treacheries which are closing in around her."

"You would not go to this extreme, Mr. Loftus?" exclaimed Agatha, now more terrified than ever.

"It would be made compulsory on my part by your perseverance in an unjust and dishonourable course," responded the young gentleman. "In any case, I am determined to seek an interview with her Royal Highness; but I should feel well pleased not to be compelled to make any mention of the name of Owen."

"But if my two sisters and I were to pledge ourselves to observe a discreet, forbearing, and honourable conduct toward the princess?" exclaimed Agatha, interrogatively.

"Even on those terms, you could not accept situations about her person with honour to yourselves," answered Jocelyn.

"Ah! you mean to say that you would not believe us," cried Agatha, her countenance becoming crimson. "But how can we retreat? Would you have us return to England and tell our mother that we have thrown up these high situations and renounced all these brilliant prospects? It is for you to pause and reflect, Mr. Loftus. What would become of us? Our mother's door would be closed against us; the public would fancy that something injurious to our characters had been suddenly discovered, and that our appointments as ladies in waiting to the princess had been cancelled. Ruin, utter ruin, irremediable ruin, would overtake us," exclaimed Agatha, in a voice of despair.

"A more fatal destruction will entomb you, body and soul, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn Loftus, with deep solemnity, "if you persist in becoming the instruments of a vile conspiracy. Besides, think you that the Princess of Wales will receive you into her establishment if forewarned against you?"

"Will you make war upon three young ladies who have

not injured you, sir? " demanded Agatha, with a mixture of indignation and reproach.

" Shall I suffer war to be made by three young ladies against a princess who not only has never injured them, but whom so many high personages in England are leagued together to ruin? " and as Jocelyn thus spoke, he fixed his gaze earnestly upon Agatha Owen, that the seriousness of his looks might confirm the decisiveness of his language.

" Oh, if my mother were here to counsel us!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears; and the bosom that ere now glowed with sensuous transports and palpitated with the longings of desire was convulsed with sobs.

" It is a most painful thing for any one to speak ill of a mother to the ears of her daughters," said Jocelyn; " but you must be aware, Miss Owen, that she who should have proved your best friend has been your greatest enemy, and fortunate will it be for you, perhaps, that your mother is not now here to influence your decision."

" And if my sisters and I renounce the service in which we are engaged," said Agatha, when the first convulsion of grief had passed, " what course are we to pursue? Whither shall we go? "

" Return to England, seek your mother, and tell her the whole truth," replied Loftus. " Say that you had no alternative but to come back to her, inasmuch as I was so resolute, so sternly resolute, in declaring that if you did not, I would warn the princess against you."

" But I must consult my sisters, I must also consult with Mrs. Ranger," observed Agatha; " and this blow has fallen so suddenly, so unexpectedly."

" Take as much time as you think fit, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn, " and in the interval I will keep aloof from you, I will even remove my quarters to another hotel — "

" No, that would excite suspicions and create scandal here," interrupted Agatha, hastily; for, notwithstanding the hostile and dictatorial attitude which Loftus had assumed, she did not wish to part from him.

" I will do nothing to increase your present annoyance," he responded. " If you can still regard me in a friendly light, after all that has just occurred, I shall cheerfully remain in your company. Indeed, I shall consider your desire for me to do so as an evidence of improved feeling

on your part, and a proof that you understand and appreciate the sentiments by which my conduct is actuated. I shall now leave you, Miss Owen, for the present, and at six o'clock I shall have the pleasure of rejoining you at the dinner-table, when I hope that no frowns or black looks will await me on the part of any one."

Having thus spoken, Jocelyn rose from his seat, bowed, and quitted the apartment, leaving Agatha a prey to all the conflicting and unenviable feelings which her own disappointed sensuality and the young man's decisive conduct had so deeply aroused in her bosom.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia shortly afterward returned; and the intelligence which Agatha at once imparted struck them with consternation. They were amazed, terrified, bewildered. But Mrs. Ranger, who in an emergency was prompt at laying aside the airs of an old coquette and looking matters deliberately in the face, soon recovered her presence of mind; and, consulting her watch, she said, "It is now five o'clock; we dine at six, and there is one hour before us. In that hour much may be done."

"But what can we do?" inquired the three sisters, as if in the same breath.

"If we persist in continuing our journey to join the princess," proceeded Agatha, "Jocelyn Loftus will hasten on in advance and poison the mind of her Royal Highness, so that we shall be dismissed in ignominy when we seek her presence; and to abandon the enterprise without a struggle would be to compel our return in equal ignominy to London."

"Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger, fixing her eyes with a peculiar but unmistakable meaning upon the eldest girl, "were there no means by which you could have silenced this moralizing babbler? Ah! if I were of your age and possessed such sweet lips as yours, they should have been employed as a seal to set upon his mouth."

"He is beyond temptation," replied Agatha, the blood rushing to her cheeks and suffusing its crimson glow on her neck and shoulders, down to the very hemispheres of her bosoms.

"Ah! I understand," said Mrs. Ranger, now observing the luxurious exposure of Agatha's charms and comprehending the motive. "We must adopt another course. Sit down at once and pen a few lines to your mother: tell her

what has happened, demand her immediate counsel, and say that we shall remain in Paris for her instructions. I will in the meantime go myself and arrange with the proprietor of the hotel for a courier to become the bearer of the letter, as we cannot wait the delays of the ordinary post."

"But Jocelyn must not know that we are despatching a courier to London," observed Agatha. "At least, it would be better that he should not."

"Leave the affair in my hands, and lose not a moment in penning your letter," said the old Hecate of iniquity. "In half an hour it must be ready."

She then left the apartment.

"And so Jocelyn was proof against your witcheries?" exclaimed Emma and Julia, the instant the door closed behind Mrs. Ranger.

"His heart is of stone to us," was the emphatic response; "but he loves another. For my part, I have done with him, — at least I think so, — and yet he is so agreeable as a companion that I should be sorry to lose him altogether from us."

"Well, my turn is now come to lay siege to him," cried Emma, her looks glowing with the animation of hope.

Agatha now began to write the letter to her mother; and in about twenty minutes it was concluded. Mrs. Ranger soon afterward made her appearance, followed by a French courier, ready booted and spurred; the despatch was delivered to him, and he instantaneously took his departure.

At six o'clock the dinner was served up, and Jocelyn made his appearance. Mrs. Ranger and the girls were less cheerful than hitherto; but there was no alteration in the friendly tone of their manner toward himself. Indeed, a glass of champagne presently restored them all to something near their wonted liveliness; and after dinner Jocelyn escorted them to the theatre. They returned to the hotel at about eleven o'clock, and sought their chambers.

The following day — this was Wednesday, and the same on which Venetia and Sackville were married in London — was passed in visiting the various exhibitions and public buildings that remained to be seen. Not a word was spoken relative to the all-important matter then pending; but Jocelyn remarked that Agatha did not seem so anxious

as before to keep near him when they were walking, or sit next to him in the carriage which was hired for the excursion; whereas it was now Emma who monopolized his arm and engrossed to herself all the attentions which the rules of courtesy compelled him to display.

The next day (Thursday) was passed in a similar manner, still nothing more being said about the important topic of Jocelyn's discourse with Agatha, and Emma still constituting herself the monopolist of his attentions. The ladies all seemed to be a trifle less cheerful than at first; and it was therefore evident that the affair had made some impression upon them. But why they took so much time to arrive at a decision, Loftus could not imagine. If he were, however, at a loss on this point, he had no difficulty in observing that Emma was assailing his heart with a thousand little seductive wiles and insidious fascinations; but he seemed to take no notice thereof, and he assuredly gave her no encouragement.

This same Thursday brought letters from England, some for the Misses Owen, and others for Jocelyn. The former, written by the young ladies' mother, made them acquainted with the burglary which had taken place on the preceding Sunday at Richmond, and the death of the footman. The correspondence for Loftus was from his beloved Louisa, who gave him the fondest and tenderest assurances of her unalterable attachment. Before Jocelyn retired to bed that Thursday night, he read Louisa's letters over and over again, and sat up late to pen her a long epistle in reply. He stated frankly that he was still in company with Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen, that he had broken the ice with regard to the object of his visit to the Continent, and that he hoped to succeed in inducing Mary's sisters to abandon their nefarious enterprise of their own accord, without compelling him to expose them to the Princess of Wales.

The following day (Friday) was passed in the same manner as the two preceding days; and Saturday was slipping by in a similar way, when Jocelyn thought it high time to express his hope to Agatha that a decision would be promptly announced to him. He accordingly found an opportunity of mentioning the subject apart to her, and she at once assured him that on the morrow he should receive a final answer. A suspicion which he had already conceived, to the effect that the ladies were awaiting instructions from Eng-

land, now became strengthened in his mind; and he frankly stated his thoughts to Agatha. But with an appearance of the most ingenuous sincerity she vowed that the delay was caused solely by the difficulty of coming to a decision on the point; and she added that the morrow being Sunday, they had resolved to devote the morning to an earnest deliberation on the course which was to be pursued. Jocelyn was satisfied to wait four and twenty hours longer, and no more was said upon the subject this day.

Having visited a theatre in the evening, the party returned to the hotel at about eleven o'clock, as usual; and soon afterward they sought their respective chambers. But when Jocelyn entered his own apartment, he found a note lying upon the toilet-table, and on examining the address, he perceived that it was in a beautiful female hand-writing.

For a few moments he hesitated to break the seal, suspecting that it was a communication from one of the young ladies; but considering, on a second thought, that indiscretion and indelicacy could scarcely be carried so far, he opened the letter. His charitable conclusion was, however, doomed to disappointment, for the contents of the note ran as follows:

" It is absolutely necessary that Agatha and I should have a few minutes' conversation with you alone, and as soon as possible. I am altogether of opinion that my sisters and myself should retire from the false and painful position in which the influence and intrigues of others have placed us; and for my own part I am resolved to follow the excellent advice which you so generously, disinterestedly, and kindly gave Agatha. In a word, I shall resign my appointment as lady in waiting to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. Agatha is also inclined to adopt the same course; but Julia cannot be persuaded to fall into the same view, and Mrs. Ranger is perversely bent in opposing it. This lady watches us narrowly, in order to prevent any private conversation with you upon the subject. To-morrow, immediately after breakfast, we are to hold a consultation, and a decision will be arrived at. But it is absolutely necessary that Agatha and myself should have the benefit of further counsel from your lips before this consultation. Will you, then, have the

kindness to meet us to-morrow morning at eight o'clock in the Champs Elysées?

"EMMA OWEN."

"It may be written in full honesty and sincerity," said Loftus to himself, as he contemplated the note which he had just perused; "but still I have my misgivings. Nevertheless, I will not prejudge the writer, but will keep the appointment."

CHAPTER VII

ANOTHER PHASE OF FASHIONABLE DEPRAVITY

CLEAR, bright, and beautiful was the Sunday morning, as Jocelyn Loftus issued from the Hotel Meurice and bent his way to the shady avenues of the Champs Elysées. This beautiful resort was not above ten minutes' walk from the hotel; and on reaching the central avenue, Jocelyn was almost instantaneously joined by Emma Owen.

"Where is your sister?" he inquired, with a somewhat serious air; for on finding that she was alone, his misgivings of the preceding night returned with double force to his breast.

"She was so long in dressing that I feared to be late," responded Emma, with an air of frank sincerity; "and as we breakfast at nine, you know, there was not a minute to spare."

"We will at once, then, proceed to the object of our interview," said Jocelyn, offering his arm to the young lady, and leading her gently along the avenue.

We must here pause to observe that on the Sunday morning in those times, as well as at the present day, large numbers of the working classes were in the habit of proceeding early to the villages in the suburbs of Paris to pass the day in dancing, rambling in the woods, water excursions, picnics, and other innocent recreations. There was scarcely a Sunday without a *ducasse*, or fair, in one of these suburban villages; and the Champs Elysées were always sure to be thronged in the morning with the pleasure-seekers repairing to the scenes of their amusement. Such was the case on the present occasion; and it was evidently impossible to pursue a serious and uninterrupted discourse in the central road of the Champs Elysées. Jocelyn was therefore compelled to con-

duct his fair companion into one of the less frequented paths; and indeed they soon found themselves entirely alone in a secluded avenue of trees.

Emma was elegantly dressed, and looked truly beautiful. The morning air and the inward fluttering of her feelings heightened the colour upon her cheeks and appeared to enhance the lustre of her eyes. Few men could have been stoical enough to resist the artillery of such charms; but Jocelyn loved his absent Louisa with the purest, holiest, and most fervid passion, and such a love is an armour of proof for him who experiences it.

"I have read your note with much attention, Miss Owen, and with unfeigned pleasure," he began, determined to take her at her word precisely as she had expressed herself in her communication. "You have resolved to resign your appointment, your eldest sister is prepared, you tell me, to adopt a similar course, but Miss Julia cannot so easily abandon a post which she doubtless considers to be invested with brilliancy and honour. Mrs. Ranger is obstinately opposed to the course I have pointed out, and she perhaps exercises considerable influence over Miss Julia's mind. Is this the actual position of the affair?"

"It is," replied Emma. Then, gazing up fondly in Jocelyn's face, she said, in a low and tremulous tone, "It was a fatal day, Mr. Loftus, when you first resolved upon your present enterprise, however generous and even chivalric may have been your motive."

"What do you mean, Miss Owen?" he demanded, surveying her in astonishment.

"I mean, Mr. Loftus, — and I implore you to hear me with attention," she cried, grasping his arm firmly with her elegantly gloved hand, as if she were fearful that he would escape her, — "I mean that you have deprived me of my peace of mind, of all my hopes of happiness in this world. You have extirpated one idea from my soul, but you have implanted another there, which is indelible. You have destroyed the dream of grandeur which I had pictured to myself in connection with my appointment to the little court of her Royal Highness; and you have left in the place of that golden vision the image of yourself. Oh, start not, attempt not to withdraw your arm, you must and you shall hear me!" she exclaimed, with a wild energy. "For I am

not the mistress of my own feelings, I cannot control my own actions. I have conceived for you a passion that is in itself a frenzy — "

"Miss Owen, I dare hear no more," said Jocelyn, resolutely and almost sternly. "Let it suffice for you to learn and for me to declare that I love another."

"Ah! wretch that I am!" she cried, with a faint shriek. "I cannot endure to live! By all that is sacred, I swear — "

"Take no rash vow, calm yourself, tranquillize your feelings," exclaimed Jocelyn, cruelly embarrassed by this scene, and deeply, deeply regretting he had kept the appointment; but more than half-suspecting that her frenzied manner was only feigned, he said, "Remember how indiscreet, how unladylike, how unmaidenly it is on your part, thus to address a young man who is almost a stranger to you."

"A stranger!" cried Emma, hysterically, as she clung with force to his arm. "No, no; I am as well acquainted with you as if I had known you all my life. Yours are qualities so resplendent that they take one by surprise, and seize, as it were, upon the very heart. You must not blame me for what I have done, for what I am doing. Why did you throw yourself in my way? Why did you seek our companionship in this journey? It was not I who sought you in the first instance. Had you been a stranger passing me in the street, and if I had accosted you, you would have been justified in spurning me from your presence; but it was far different. You introduced yourself, as it were, to me, you shone upon me in all the glory of your beautiful person and your brilliant mind, and you snatched away my heart. It was not taken slowly and insidiously, it was ravished all in a moment. And can I help this love, this immeasurable love, with which you have inspired me? Is it my fault that I have succumbed to the magic of that voice and those looks the influence of which has been shed upon me? And you — cruel that you are — you reproach me for telling you that state of mind into which you yourself have plunged me!"

Then, apparently exhausted by this torrent of words which she had poured out with passionate vehemence, Emma Owen sank upon a bench and gave way to a flood of equally violent weeping.

Jocelyn threw a rapid glance around; and it was some relief to his immense perplexity to be assured that no observer was nigh. Indeed, he was most cruelly bewildered. The ardour of the young lady's language, her impassioned manner, her wild looks, and then her apparently deep anguish, all staggered him. Himself too little versed in the treacheries and hypocrisies, the feints and the artifices, of which the human mind is capable, he could not believe that this scene was all duplicity, all a studied tragedy, from the beginning up to the present stage. And yet he could not bring himself to fancy it entirely genuine and real. Thus, tormented by uncertainty, fearful of proving harsh on the one hand, and recoiling from the idea of being made a dupe on the other, he dared not withhold commiseration, and he dared not proffer it.

"Miss Owen," he said, in a voice that was serious without being severe, and in a manner that was reserved without being harsh, "I must beg and implore that you permit me at once to escort you back to the hotel. There is a duty which you owe to yourself, there is a duty which you owe to me as a fellow creature. That is, to control your feelings, to whatever extent they may be excited."

"Oh, this is maddening — maddening!" exclaimed Emma, clasping her hands as if in despair. "How can you preach patience, calmness, and duty to one who is goaded to frenzy? You say that you love another. Well, I seek not to interfere with the happiness of that being whom you have blessed with this enviable love. You have a whole life to devote to her; can you, then, refuse me one single day, one single hour of love, since you have stolen away my heart? Ah! it is a dreadful confession to make, and I feel the tingling of shame from the crown of my head to my very feet; but this confession must be made all the same. And it is that I love you with a madness of passion, with a frenzy that will prove my death; and that madness, that frenzy, must be appeased. Surely no woman ever loved so wildly, so intensely, and so enthusiastically before. My doom, then, is in your hands. Give me one day, one single day, of that blessed love of thine, and I shall sustain myself on the memory thereof for the rest of my life. Nay, I shall even be happy, contented, rejoiced; and I shall treasure up the recollection of that one day's consummated bliss as the only

gem that my soul covets. But refuse me, Jocelyn, refuse me," she said, the exaltation of her voice and manner suddenly sinking into lowness and gloom, "refuse me, I say, and the waters of the Seine are deep — "

"Heavens! what madness is this?" cried Loftus, his perplexity now rising into the cruellest alarm. "I have listened to you too long, Miss Owen, and you have said too much."

"Farewell, then, farewell for ever!" she suddenly exclaimed; and springing from the seat, she sped along the avenue with the fleetness of the hunted deer, toward the bank of the river Seine which flowed hard by.

"Good God! she is serious — it is no artifice!" thought Jocelyn; and, wild with terror, he bounded after her, overtaking her near the end of the avenue.

She sank exhausted in his arms; and as he bore her to one of the numerous benches scattered about, he saw that her eyes were closing as if she were going to faint, although the deep hues of overwrought excitement remained upon her cheeks.

Placing himself upon the seat, which was a mere common bench without any back to lean against, he was compelled to support her in his arms; and once more did he look up and down the avenue, in the fear of being observed. But no person was approaching, nor even visible from that spot; and, somewhat relieved by this circumstance, he again bent his looks upon the countenance of the young lady.

"Ah! it were sweet to die thus," she murmured, softly, as she opened her eyes and gazed up into his countenance with ineffable tenderness. "But wherefore did you pursue me, why did you hold me back, when in another minute there would have been an end to the woes, the anguish, and the despair which you have implanted in my bosom?"

"Let us not renew the conversation now, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn, gently raising her recumbent form. "You have afflicted me sadly, you have terrified me profoundly, and I must insist that we return at once to the hotel."

"You will subject me, then, to the matchless humiliation of having besought an hour of your love, and experiencing a refusal?" murmured Emma, bending down her hazel eyes, upon the lashes of which the teardrops trembled, while the

blush of shame was now upon her cheeks, and her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"I scarcely think you comprehend the purport of your own words, Miss Owen," said Loftus, emphatically; "and I hope to God that you do not. Very, very painful would it be for me to imagine — "

"Oh," she exclaimed, in another paroxysm of frenzied exaltation, "you must imagine the truth, and of that truth I am not ashamed. For you have filled my heart with a passion which is consuming me; and all my happiness, my very life, indeed, is staked upon the hope of appeasing it. Revile, scorn, loath, abhor me as you will, denounce me as unmaidenly, proscribe me as a disgrace to my sex, but still you cannot alter the condition of my heart. And surely when a fond, a loving, and a devoted woman offers to abandon herself to you, not only as a proof of that illimitable worship, that frenzied adoration, but also that she herself may have the recollection of that hour of love and bliss to compensate her for the loss of thee thereafter and enable her to sustain the weight of the future years of her existence, surely, I say, you will not spurn her altogether!"

Thus speaking, Emma fixed her fond and earnest regards in profound entreaty upon Jocelyn Loftus, who, shocked at the dreadful depravity which was enveloped in such softly insidious language, could not prevent his looks from betraying the disgust that filled his soul.

"Take my arm, madam," he said, in a stern and imperious tone, as he rose from the bench. "It is time we should hasten homeward."

"No, I will not move until I have your response," exclaimed Emma, passionately.

"Then hear it, whatever be the consequences," rejoined Loftus. "Your wiles, your arts, your fascinations are wasted upon me. I would sooner perish than prove unfaithful to her who possesses my love. Come, Miss Owen, I insist upon our immediate departure hence."

Humiliated, baffled, disappointed, and almost crushed with the overpowering sense of shame, Emma saw that her seductive arts were indeed thrown away upon this well-principled young man; and mechanically taking his arm, she suffered him to lead her from the secluded avenue where the extraordinary scene just recorded had taken place.

Not a word was now spoken between them; nor did Emma dare even to risk a furtive glance at his countenance, for fear he should observe that she thus regarded him. But there was in the depths of her soul the intuitive conviction that his looks were full of the expression of outraged feeling; and depraved as she was in heart, she nevertheless deplored her folly in risking so consummate a humiliation. She was also racked by the torture of unappeasable desires; for although her conduct toward Jocelyn had commenced in artifice and duplicity, it had nevertheless acquired a certain amount of sincerity from the inspiration of her licentious passions. Thus the ardour of her language was not altogether feigned; but it was created by the heart's own incendiarism of feelings, and not by the purer flame of love.

In silence did they regain the hotel; and the moment they entered the passage leading to the sitting-room, Jocelyn stopped short.

" Miss Owen," he said, " I shall not betray to a living soul the particulars of the interview which has taken place between us. I will not add to your humiliation by publishing your shame. If your absence has been observed, I leave you to give what explanations you choose. But I must decline the honour of henceforth joining your party at table or elsewhere. If your sisters and yourself have any communication to make relative to the important subject which I need only thus allude to, it can be done in writing. But if I hear nothing from you in the course of this day, I shall to-morrow morning continue my journey — but alone — toward Italy; and her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales will be duly prepared to receive the spies whom her unprincipled husband has appointed to attend upon her."

Having thus spoken, Jocelyn Loftus bowed coldly and turned away; and Emma, who had listened with flushing cheeks, downcast eyes, and trembling form, hastened up to her own chamber to give vent to her agitated feelings in a flood of tears.

On thus leaving the young lady, Jocelyn issued from the passage and passed into the courtyard of the hotel, for the purpose of seeking the coffee-room where he intended to take his breakfast. But he was accosted by an elderly, sour-looking Frenchman, plainly though by no means shabbily

dressed, and the first glance of whose eyes seemed intended to pierce Loftus through and through.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he began, politely raising his hat, "but I wish to have a word or two with you on business of importance."

"We will inquire for a private room," said Jocelyn, not much liking the man's appearance or mode of address, and having a vague and undefined suspicion of some impending treachery.

"It is not worth while, sir," was the response. "In fact, I may as well inform you at once that I am a police agent, and those persons," he added, glancing over his shoulder toward two individuals, also in plain clothes, who were lounging under the gateway, "are my comrades. You will have the goodness, sir, to accompany me to the prefecture of police."

"For what purpose, and upon what charge?" demanded Loftus, indignantly.

"Merely to give the prefect some little explanations, sir," replied the police agent. "I dare say it will be all right; but you must come away at once."

"Allow me to visit my chamber for a moment," said Loftus, "in order to fetch some papers and documents that I may require to prove my respectability, if that be the point on which the prefect demands information."

"Your papers are already in my possession, sir," returned the police agent, drily.

"What! you have dared violate the privacy of my writing-desk?" exclaimed Jocelyn, more indignantly than at first.

"I had my authority, sir," was the cold and laconic rejoinder.

Jocelyn paused for a few moments; but well aware that the French police possessed extraordinary powers, and reflecting how useless it would be to defy them, he said, "I will accompany you."

The agent again raised his hat politely, and followed Loftus from the courtyard of the hotel. On emerging into the street, they entered a hackney-coach that was ready waiting at a little distance, and the officer made a sign to his two men that they need not follow into the vehicle, as they were about to do.

The hackney-coach rolled away along the Rue St. Honoré; and during its progress to the headquarters of the police, Jocelyn endeavoured to glean from his companion a more special idea of the cause of the present proceeding. But the agent was so guarded in his replies that the young gentleman was left as much in the dark as he was before he put his queries, though, perhaps, his own conjectures furnished him with some faint glimmering of the real truth.

In twenty minutes the hackney-coach turned into the dark and gloomy gateway of the prefecture; and Jocelyn was immediately conducted by the police agent into the presence of an old gentleman, who was seated at a desk in a handsomely furnished apartment. This functionary was the prefect of police.

"Be seated," he said, in a courteous tone; and Jocelyn, as he took a chair, began to imagine that there was no treachery in contemplation, after all.

Meantime the police agent had quitted the apartment; but returning in a few moments, he handed the prefect a document which Jocelyn instantaneously recognized as his own passport, and which he had delivered to the landlord of the hotel, according to custom, on his arrival in Paris.

"You know this paper?" said the prefect, displaying it before Jocelyn's eyes.

"I do. It is my passport," he replied.

"But it is made out in a false name, sir," remarked the prefect. "You do not deny this allegation?"

"I do not deny it," rejoined the young gentleman; "but I will at once, and, I am sure, in the most satisfactory manner, explain to your Excellency the reasons — "

"I ask no explanations, sir," interrupted the prefect, more curtly and severely than before. "With your motives I have nothing to do; the fact, which you deny not, is sufficient for me. It is my painful duty to detain you in custody for the present. You will have the goodness to accompany the officer — "

"But, your Excellency, this outrage — "

"Silence, sir!" ejaculated the prefect, now speaking with unmitigated sternness.

"No, I will not remain silent," exclaimed Loftus, his countenance glowing with indignation. "As a British

subject, I shall demand the protection of my country's ambassador — "

But the prefect cut short the young gentleman's words by abruptly quitting the apartment; and the police agent, tapping him upon the shoulder, said, " Have the goodness to follow me, sir."

Loftus, perceiving that it was useless to remonstrate with a subordinate who was obeying the commands of a superior, accompanied him from the room, and was conducted along a dark passage to a small, ill-furnished chamber, the windows of which were defended with massive iron bars.

The door was then closed upon him; and as the grating sound of the key turning in the lock and of the huge bolts shooting into their sockets met his ears, he thought of his absent and well-beloved Louisa, and his heart sank within him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE REUNION OF THE PARTY OF SIX

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the marriage of Horace Sackville and Venetia Trelawney; and in the evening of the 10th of October (for, after Byron's example, we like to be particular in dates) all was bustle and activity at the house of Colonel Malpas in Great Marlborough Street.

The dining-room was brilliantly lighted; the table was laid for six persons, the sideboard exhibited a splendid dessert in crystal dishes, and the culinary process below-stairs gave promise of a luxurious banquet.

At about a quarter to six o'clock Colonel Malpas, dressed in full evening costume, descended from his chamber and cast an approving eye over the arrangements in the dining-room. Everything was to his perfect satisfaction; and his butler received due acknowledgments for the taste displayed in the preliminary details of the entertainment.

"It does you infinite credit, Plumpstead," said the colonel, "very great credit indeed. By the bye, how much am I indebted to you, my good fellow?"

"Only two years and a half's wages, at forty guineas a year, sir," was the response; but though Mr. Plumpstead courteously introduced the word only, it must by no means be fancied that he was well pleased at the existence of these long arrears.

"Ah! that's a hundred guineas, Plumpstead," said the colonel. "Well, I shall settle with you to-morrow, you may rely upon it."

"I hope you will not forget it, sir," replied the butler, with a low bow. Then, as his master left the room, he muttered to himself, "The cheating scoundrel! I don't believe I shall ever see the colour of my money. I can take

my oath something queer's going to happen, for I am certain that fellow was a sheriff's officer who called this morning to ask if the colonel was in town. And by the bye, I forgot to tell master of it; but no matter. To-morrow will be time enough."

Thus mused Mr. Plumpstead, the butler, while the colonel ascended the well-lighted staircase to the drawing-room. There he surveyed himself from head to foot in one of the handsome mirrors; and as he caressed his moustache, he complacently observed, " Well, I certainly am good-looking enough to win the favours of even such a transcendent beauty as Venetia Trelawney."

But still the colonel was not altogether easy in his mind. To speak more plainly still, he was restless, nervous, and agitated. It was true that he had succeeded in persuading his wife to pay a visit for the occasion to her plebeian relatives in the City, — for be it remembered that he had married the daughter of a retired butcher, — and he had also managed to get the money to provide the sumptuous banquet about to take place. But the satisfaction arising from these achievements was more than counterbalanced by the desperate hazards and risks he was about to run, and into which his desperate circumstances had impelled him. In fact, he was knave enough to concoct any villainy; but he was somewhat deficient in the courage necessary to carry it out. Therefore, the nearer the hour approached for executing the scheme on which he was bent, the more nervous did he become.

In addition to this, Emmerson had compelled him to sign a note of hand, payable on demand, for the amount of the forged bills. This note was given on the morning after the scene with Lady Curzon at Mrs. Gale's; thus a fortnight had elapsed, and the note was still unpaid. Two or three days previous to the evening of which we are now writing, Malpas received an urgent and indeed threatening letter from Mr. Emmerson; but he had written to put the bill-broker off with a solemn assurance to liquidate the whole sum in the course of the week. His only hope of paying the amount existed in the result of the scheme which he had now in hand, and in furtherance of which the banquet was to be given, and if this scheme should fail, utter ruin would stare him in the face, with the

concomitant alternatives of flight to the Continent or a debtor's gaol.

Such was the position wherein Colonel Malpas was placed, and the reader requires not to be assured that it was far from an enviable one. Indeed, that self-sufficient survey of his person in the mirror and that complacent caressing of the moustache were only the sickly attempt of an agitated mind to persuade itself that it was not so restless as it really was, in the same way that a guilty person who trembles at every knock at the door endeavours to tranquillize his fears by constantly saying, "After all, it is impossible I can be found out." Thus do men, in difficult and dangerous circumstances, invariably strive to reason themselves out of their most settled convictions, and persuade themselves that the feelings which torture them are really not felt at all.

But to return to the thread of our story.

Precisely at six o'clock a carriage dashed up to the colonel's house, and in a few moments the footman flung open the drawing-room door, announcing, in a loud voice, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon!"

The colonel hastened forward to receive him; and as they shook hands, the baronet said, with a gay laugh, "Well, upon my word, Malpas, I was never more surprised in all my life than when I received your note of invitation to this banquet."

"Is there anything so very remarkable in my having company?" observed the colonel, affecting a happy and good-humoured smile. "Methinks," he continued, with his wonted drawing-room drawl, "this is not the first time I shall have had the pleasure of entertaining you, Huntingdon; and I am sure I hope it will not be the last."

"And so do I," exclaimed the baronet, flinging himself upon a seat. "But your note enjoined me to lay aside any other engagement I might have formed, inasmuch as this banquet was in pursuance of the agreement entered into a month ago at Leveson House. What, then, could I imagine, but that, after all, you have been the successful candidate for the favours of the lovely Venetia?"

"Well, you shall see presently," observed Malpas, assuming a pleasant look of mingled significancy and triumph. "All in good time, you know; the banquet first, and business afterward."

"But how on earth could Sackville have married her?" exclaimed the baronet, evidently bewildered by the various thoughts that were agitating conflictingly in his mind. "Of course he did not know that she had already had been won by you; and, if he comes to-night, I should think the scene will be rather a painful, or, at all events, an extraordinary one. He will have to be told to his face that he married a woman who, with all her enchanting beauty, was no better than she should be —"

At this moment the door was again thrown open, and the Earl of Curzon was announced.

"My dear Malpas," he exclaimed, "is it a fact? — or is it a hoax? It is assuredly no delusion that you purpose to give us a banquet, for the dining-room door stood open as I passed through the hall; and to clear up the misgivings which had haunted me ever since I received your note a few days back, I peeped in and saw covers laid for six. Pardon this impertinence on my part, but I really could not help thus gratifying my curiosity and appeasing my suspense."

"Well, I have been as much astonished as yourself, Curzon," said Sir Douglas Huntingdon, while the colonel endeavoured to look good-humouredly knowing and complacently mysterious. "But I was observing to Malpas just as you came in, what an ass Sackville has either made of himself or else will be made to appear to-night."

"I don't think he will come," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "In fact, he can not; he would never dare show his face amongst us. He will be too much ashamed of himself, and will never stand all the bantering he must expect for being so egregiously duped. For my part, I think Venetia is a deuced deal worse than he must even suspect after receiving Malpas's note — But, by the bye, did you send him one?" asked the nobleman, turning toward the colonel.

"To be sure I did," was the response. "Was I not bound to do so in accordance with the agreement made at Leveson House?"

"As a matter of course," observed Huntingdon. "But what do you mean, Curzon," he inquired, evidently struck by something the nobleman had said, "when you state that Venetia is worse than her husband can even suspect her to be after receiving Malpas's note of invitation?"

" I mean," replied the earl, " that I am very much mistaken if — "

But he stopped short as the door was again thrown open and the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance.

Malpas hastened to welcome the old debauchee, who, after shaking hands with Curzon and Sir Douglas, drew the colonel aside, saying, " I'm really afraid this will turn out an unpleasant business."

" How do you mean? " inquired Malpas, a cold terror seizing upon him.

" Because it must produce a quarrel between you and Sackville."

" No such thing. If he were fool enough to be gulled into a marriage with a woman who had previously surrendered herself to me — "

" There is some force in your argument," interrupted Lord Leveson; " but let us look well at the matter so as to anticipate, if possible, any dispute with Sackville, which might give publicity to the thing."

" Oh, for his own sake, he will not let the world know what a fool he has been," said the colonel, evidently anxious to escape from the colloquy into which the marquis was drawing him.

" At all events, let us talk it over, Malpas," persisted the nobleman; and leading him still farther toward the extremity of the spacious drawing-room, he proceeded to argue upon the necessity of caution, but evidently with the more interested object of extracting from the colonel all the particulars relative to his presumed triumph over Venetia.

Meanwhile Sir Douglas Huntingdon had drawn the Earl of Curzon aside to the other extremity of the drawing-room; and looking him earnestly in the face, he said, " What was the observation you were about to make when Leveson arrived? "

" Well, I hardly know whether I ought to give utterance to my suspicions," returned the earl, in a musing tone; " but in confidence between you and me, I have every reason to believe that Venetia abandoned herself to the Marquis of Leveson and the Prince of Wales — "

" And I have entertained precisely the same suspicions," interrupted the baronet.

"The devil you have!" said the earl, in surprise. "But how on earth — "

"I know what you are going to say," remarked the baronet, with a smile of peculiar meaning; "and may I not also inquire how on earth you came to glean your information on those points? Come, let us be candid with each other."

"Willingly," said the earl. "In plain terms, then, I bribed Tash and his man Robin to watch Venetia — "

"So did I," responded the baronet.

"Well! this is excellent!" remarked Curzon. "And they informed you that Venetia went to Leveson House and Carlton Palace on the same night?"

"Precisely so," returned the baronet. "But they also gave me a version of Malpas's interview with Venetia in Lady Wenlock's grounds at Kew, which does not very well tally with his boasted triumph over her."

"And they gave me a similarly puzzling account of that interview," rejoined Curzon. "In fact, it is this that has so much perplexed me. I do not know what to think. Either Tash or Malpas must lie most tremendously."

"The affair is curiously involved," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon; "and its details are intricate to a degree. Malpas never would be fool and scoundrel enough — "

"I have no very exalted opinion of him," said the earl, "and you must remember there are six thousand guineas at stake. Leveson is treasurer; and we will not allow him to part with the money unless Malpas can give us the most positive and undeniable proofs that he really succeeded in being the first to win the favours of Venetia. What induces me to fancy that he might have done so is that Venetia evidently abandoned herself to Leveson and the prince, — on the same evening, too; and therefore she is thoroughly depraved."

"But why should she have rejected you and me?" asked the baronet. "At all events, if money be her object, you could have given her as much as Malpas; and if good looks be concerned, I may add, without flattery, that you ought to have stood a better chance than he."

At this moment the door was thrown open; and the domestic announced his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

Malpas, instantaneously quitting Lord Leveson, advanced

to meet the prince, who shook hands with him as cordially as ever, despite the angry declaration which he had made to Venetia, the night of her visit to Carlton Palace, to the effect that the colonel was a sneaking scoundrel and would do well never to show himself in his royal presence again. Thus was it, however, that the royal presence was now vouchsafed at the colonel's dwelling, notwithstanding the menace alluded to.

After exchanging a few words with Malpas on ordinary topics, and without the slightest mention of Venetia's name, the prince regent suddenly turned toward Leveson, saying, "By the bye, my dear marquis, I have a few words to whisper in your ear, — on a political matter; and I hope Malpas will excuse my rudeness in taking you aside."

"Your Royal Highness is the master here as elsewhere," said the colonel; and, caressing his moustache, he proceeded to join the Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

The prince took Leveson's arm and lounged with him toward the end of the room; then, in a low tone, he said, "What the devil is the meaning of all this?"

"I cannot understand it," responded the marquis. "It seems tolerably clear that Malpas has achieved a triumph; and I believe it, because when Venetia came to my house she told me that the colonel had made her acquainted with all the particulars of the love-campaign."

"She told me precisely the same thing," observed the prince; "but she spoke of Malpas at the time in terms of contempt and disgust."

"That may have been an artifice," said Lord Leveson. "Malpas assures me he shall produce the most undeniable evidence of his success, but what the evidence is he would not explain at present. Venetia must be as deceptive and designing as she is beautiful."

"I really begin to think so," observed the prince. "It was my intention to cut Malpas for ever; but when I received his note of invitation to this banquet, and understood the meaning it implied, I was positively astounded. I therefore resolved to suspend my opinion altogether until the events of this evening should have transpired. But I am seriously afraid that Sackville has made a great fool of himself, and is inveigled into a match with an unprincipled adventuress,—

most probably head and ears in debt, and only anxious to get a husband in order to throw the burden of her liabilities upon his shoulders and thus save herself from prison."

"It looks uncommonly like it," observed the marquis.

"By the bye, any news of the gossamer lady?" asked the prince, with a smile.

"None, sir," responded the nobleman, his looks becoming clouded all in a moment; but instantaneously recovering his composure, he said, "Does your Royal Highness know whether Mr. and Mrs. Sackville have returned to town?"

"I do not," answered the prince. "But perhaps Malpas can tell us." Then, advancing toward the centre of the room, he said, "Colonel, do you know whether the Sackvilles have returned from Brighton?"

"They came back last night, sir," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, "and proceeded to Acacia Cottage."

"You had that information from our friend Tash," whispered the baronet, hurriedly. "He sent Robin to me late last night with the same intelligence."

"Do you think Sackville will join our party?" inquired the prince.

"I have received no answer to my invitation," said the colonel.

"For my part, I do not think he will make his appearance," observed the Earl of Curzon.

"Nor I," added Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "He must be heartily ashamed of himself, no doubt."

"And would not like to face us, eh?" said the Marquis of Leveson.

"He fears, perhaps, a terrible bantering," observed the prince regent.

"It is now half-past six," said the colonel, consulting his watch; "and that is the time named in the note of invitation. Shall I order dinner to be served up?"

But ere the prince, to whom the question was put, had time to answer, the door was again thrown open, and the servant announced Mr. Horace Sackville.

CHAPTER IX

THE BANQUET

VENETIA'S husband advanced into the room with the easy assurance and calm self-possession of good breeding, and as if there were nothing peculiar either in his own position or in the circumstances of the present occasion. Having paid his respects to Colonel Malpas, who could very well have dispensed with his company, Horace turned toward the prince, and his Royal Highness shook him with all his wonted cordiality by the hand. The Marquis of Leveson and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were equally warm in their greetings; whereas the Earl of Curzon was not only somewhat cold and distant, but likewise suffered a partial sneer to curl his lips as he spoke. Sackville did not, however, seem to notice this manifestation of ill-feeling, but, turning again toward the others, he proceeded to discourse, without constraint or embarrassment, upon the principal topics of the day.

In a few minutes the domestic announced that dinner was served, and the party repaired to the banqueting-room.

The repast was of the most succulent description, fully equalling that of which the same company had partaken at Lord Leveson's. The wines were of the first quality, and the dessert was not less commendable to the tastes of the convivialists. During the banquet not a word was spoken in reference to the object of the meeting, and not an allusion made to it. But the discourse was sustained, as if by a common consent, on a variety of other subjects. Nevertheless, everybody did in his heart feel that unless these efforts were made to support the conversation uninterruptedly, the damp of constraint would speedily fall upon their spirits. As for Colonel Malpas, he drank large quantities

of wine in order to keep up an artificial gaiety; but the nearer the moment arrived for the grand act in the drama, the more nervous and apprehensive did he in reality become.

At length the cloth was drawn, the dessert was placed upon the table, and the domestics retired.

It was now about eight o'clock in the evening; and Mr. Plumpstead, the butler, opening the front door, looked up and down Great Marlborough Street, by the light of the lamps. In a few minutes three persons descended from a private carriage at a little distance; and, having directed that the vehicle should wait for their return, they hurried to the door at which the butler was standing.

These three persons were Venetia, Captain Tash, and his man Robin.

The lady was elegantly dressed and looked enchantingly beautiful, as if she had even derived a more brilliant loveliness from matrimony. Captain Tash was in full evening costume, with dress coat, white waistcoat and cravat, and kid gloves. His aspect was uncommonly fierce as usual, but blended therewith was an air of supreme importance. As for Robin, he was decently attired; but the purple robes of Napoleon could not have imparted dignity to his shambling gait and sneaking looks.

"Hush!" said the butler, putting his finger to his lips in a knowing manner, the instant Venetia and her two companions ascended the steps; "it is all right. Mr. Sackville has told me of your coming, and he's a real gentleman. He wouldn't owe two years and a half's wages to a poor butler, I'll be bound."

Having somewhat relieved his feelings by this indirect cut at his master, Mr. Plumpstead admitted Venetia, Captain Tash, and Robin into the house, gently closing the front door.

"Now, ma'am, what can I do for you next?" he inquired of Venetia. "Mr. Sackville has done what's right toward me."

"He has proposed to take you into his service?" said Venetia.

"He has, ma'am; and therefore I already regard you as my missus."

"Can you manage to leave the dining-room door a little

ajar," inquired Venetia, "so that I may overhear what takes place within?"

"Certainly, ma'am," responded Plumpstead. "Be so good as to remain here quite quiet; there's no fear of any one coming out of the dining-room, and if any of the other servants should see you in the hall, they won't say a word. I've given them a hint upon the subject."

Thus speaking, Plumpstead cast a glance upon the hall table in search of some object which should furnish a pretext for entering the dining-room; and taking up a crystal jug, filled with water, he threw his napkin half-round it in the true butler-fashion, and carried it in. As he placed it upon the table, Colonel Malpas said, "You need not come in any more until I ring."

"Very good, sir," replied Plumpstead; and he paused for a few instants to open a large screen and draw it around the door, apparently to keep out the draught, but in reality to hide the door itself.

Then, issuing from the room, he caused the door to sound as if it were being shut, whereas he left it ajar. Captain Tash, Venetia, and Robin were thus enabled to overhear in the hall whatever took place in the dining-room.

The critical moment had now arrived for Colonel Malpas to carry out the daring scheme which he had concocted; and when it became evident that he was about to rise and speak, the looks of his guests were fixed upon him with an expression of intense interest.

Tossing off a bumper of port, he rose and said, "May it please your Royal Highness, and you, my lords and gentlemen, it would ill become me to act as chairman or president at a meeting in which I am about to perform a somewhat prominent part. I therefore suggest that our esteemed treasurer, the Marquis of Leveson, shall preside over our proceedings."

"A very excellent suggestion," observed the prince regent. "Of course you all agree. Good! Come, take the chair, Leveson."

Colonel Malpas accordingly resigned his seat at the head of the table to the marquis, and took the one which this nobleman had hitherto occupied next to the prince regent.

"Now," said Lord Leveson, as he drew forth his pocket-book and counted down six bank-notes, each for a thousand

pounds, afterward placing a purse full of gold upon them, "here are the six thousand guineas which I have held as treasurer, and which I am prepared to pay into the hands of the fortunate individual who shall prove his right and title to the same, according to the terms of our compact. But I must observe, as your chairman, that I hope our proceedings will be conducted with the utmost good-humour, and that each and all will preserve a calm temper, no matter what may transpire."

"A bumper to ratify that most judicious sentiment!" exclaimed the dissipated Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"And now," resumed the Marquis of Leveson, when the glasses had been filled and emptied, "it becomes my painful duty to ask our young and esteemed friend, Mr. Sackville, whether, as the husband of the lady whose name will have to be mentioned presently, and whose image is doubtless in all our minds, he has any remark to make ere our proceedings continue any further?"

"For the moment I have only a suggestion to offer," replied Horace, speaking in a firm tone; "which is, that your lordship shall take the names in the order they issued from the ballot, and each shall answer yea or nay, as explanatory of the result of his suit in respect to the lady alluded to."

"Be it so," said the Marquis of Leveson; "and I think the suggestion is a good one. According to the ballot, the names stood in the following order: Monday, the Earl of Curzon; Tuesday, Sir Douglas Huntingdon; Wednesday, Colonel Malpas; Thursday, the prince regent; Friday, the Marquis of Leveson; Saturday, Mr. Sackville. According, then, to this category, I call upon the Earl of Curzon to speak first."

"I am bound to admit, frankly and candidly," replied this nobleman, "that I experienced no success in the matter alluded to."

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon!" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson.

"With equal frankness and candour, I declare that I was as unsuccessful as Lord Curzon," answered the baronet.

"Colonel Malpas!" exclaimed the marquis.

"My lord," said that individual, rising from his chair, and speaking in a voice which borrowed its calmness from

desperation, " I am bound, however painful the announcement may be to any friend present, — and seeing the peculiar nature of the circumstances which were initiated in an after-dinner frolic, I hope there will be no loss of friendship on this account, — I am bound, I say, to declare that the result of my campaign made me for the time being the happiest of men."

Having thus spoken, the colonel resumed his chair and immediately tossed off a bumper of wine.

" Let the names be called to the end of the list," said Horace Sackville, whose face was white as a sheet, but whose voice was nevertheless marked by a firm decision.

" Be it so," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson. " The prince regent! "

" On my honour, as a man and a gentleman, setting aside my rank for the present," returned his Royal Highness, " I cannot boast of having been blessed with the favours of the lady alluded to."

The Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon exchanged rapid looks, expressive of surprise at this announcement, the truth of which they could not doubt; they therefore both fell back upon the belief that Captain Tash must have deceived them in his representation of Venetia's visit to Carlton House.

" My own name stands next upon the list," said the Marquis of Leveson, " and my explanation is precisely the same as that already given by his Royal Highness." Then after a moment's pause, he observed, with a half-smile, " Mr. Sackville, am I to call upon you? "

" Most assuredly," returned Horace, his cheeks now slightly flushing, and his voice remaining imperturbably calm. " I wooed Venetia — and I won her. She is my wife. But if Colonel Malpas can prove that previously to our wedding-day he succeeded in obtaining the favours of her whom I have thus made my wife, I cannot possibly, under the very peculiar circumstances of the case, be offended with him. Seeing, however, that so far as I am concerned a love-campaign which commenced as an after-dinner frolic has terminated in the most serious and solemn manner for myself, — namely in marriage, — I hope that Colonel Malpas will not stand forward to blast the reputation of my wife without having irrefragable evidence to produce in

support of his assertion; and I likewise hope that you, whom I now address, will not consider that the present scene is nothing more than another act in the same after-dinner farce, but that you will treat the matter with all the solemnity and seriousness that should characterize a jury of honourable men."

There was a tone of deep feeling in this speech which produced a visible effect upon all present; and the Earl of Curzon, now that his heart was somewhat warmed by the generous wine, was the very first to exclaim, " By Heaven, Sackville, you shall have fair play! " This sentiment was echoed by the prince regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon; while Malpas, whose heart was sinking within his breast, tossed off two or three glasses of wine in rapid succession.

But still sustained to a considerable degree by the courage which often arises from the desperation of a neck-or-nothing position, he rose from his seat amidst a profound silence, and spoke as follows:

" Far be it from me to make a declaration of so serious and solemn a nature as that which I have put forth without being enabled to substantiate it. Hitherto we have all of us been apt to deal lightly enough with the reputation of women; and we should doubtless have continued to do so in the present instance, were it not that the lady in question has recently married one of our party, and that the husband himself is present. I will make no lengthy comment upon what I may term the imprudence, if not the actual indelicacy, of Mr. Sackville appearing amongst us under existing circumstances; but I cannot help adding that whatever statements he may now hear to shock his feelings, he himself to some extent courts the feelings they are thus calculated to excite."

He paused for a few instants; and those who glanced furtively at Horace Sackville saw that he was evidently labouring under the influence of emotions which he had some little trouble to restrain. His cheeks had a hectic flush, like that of fever, upon them, his eyes were fixed, but unnaturally bright, and his lips were firmly compressed. His whole appearance indicated the inevitable bursting forth of a terrific storm; it was the volcano as yet sleeping, but surrounded by the fever-heat that preludes an explosion.

"I will now proceed to my proofs," resumed Malpas, who alone mistook Sackville's ominous looks and guarded silence for the evidences of a crushed and broken spirit. "You are aware that my day for the love-campaign was a Wednesday. On the previous day I chanced to call upon Lady Wenlock at Kew; and in the course of conversation her ladyship mentioned that the most celebrated beauty of the day, Miss Venetia Trelawney (as her name then was, previously to her marriage), was to be at the horticultural fête announced by her ladyship for the ensuing evening. Having already received an invitation, I resolved to be there. On the Wednesday morning I met Mr. Sackville by accident, and told him I should be at the fête, in order to avail myself thereof to procure an introduction to Miss Trelawney. Mr. Sackville must remember the circumstance."

"Perfectly," said Horace, in a cold but untrembling voice.

"I did repair to that festival," continued the colonel, "and I obtained the wished-for introduction to Miss Trelawney, as she then was. I need not enter into particulars. Suffice it to say that we walked together in a secluded avenue, allowing the ladies who accompanied her — Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot, I believe — to proceed a considerable distance ahead. My suit, which I pleaded passionately, was successful, and Miss Trelawney gave me an appointment for the ensuing Friday evening, at a place which I named."

"Friday evening!" ejaculated the Marquis of Leveson, exchanging a rapid but meaning glance with the Prince of Wales.

"Yes, the Friday evening," returned Malpas; "and consequently before Mr. Sackville's marriage with the lady, which marriage took place on the ensuing Wednesday. One more word will suffice: Miss Trelawney met me on the Friday evening alluded to at the house of Mrs. Gale in Soho Square."

"At what o'clock?" inquired the Marquis of Leveson.

"At nine o'clock," responded Malpas.

"And how long did she remain with you at Mrs. Gale's?" asked Lord Leveson, with another rapid, but now astonished look, at the prince regent. "Let us have all the circumstances stated in detail and accurately recorded," he observed, making notes in his pocketbook.

" Miss Trelawney remained with me at Mrs. Gale's from nine until past eleven on that Friday evening," returned Colonel Malpas.

" But the proof of this? " said the marquis, inquiringly.

" Here is Mrs. Gale's own certificate of the fact," answered the colonel, tossing a folded paper toward the marquis. " I have no more to say," and he resumed his seat.

The Marquis of Leveson opened the paper; and the astonishment he already felt was enhanced when he recognized Mrs. Gale's handwriting, which was perfectly familiar to him. He had expected to find the document a forgery; but there was no doubt it was genuine, although the circumstances detailed in it might not be true, for all that.

" Yes, this is Mrs. Gale's handwriting," he said. " I know and can attest it."

He then read the paper, which set forth that Colonel Malpas and Miss Venetia Trelawney (now Mrs. Sackville) had passed two hours together at her establishment, between nine and eleven o'clock, on the night of Friday, September 20, 1814.

Malpas now felt assured that his triumph was complete; for Horace Sackville still remained silent and motionless, with the fever spots burning upon his cheeks and his lips quivering.

The marquis and the prince once more exchanged looks of ineffable astonishment, as if uncertain what course to pursue, and yet having it in their power to make some startling revelations; while the Earl of Curzon whispered hurriedly to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, " You see how that rascal Tash deceived us both! "

But all on a sudden the door was thrown open with such violence that the screen was nearly upset, and Venetia herself, followed by Captain Tash, entered the room. Robin was not, however, with them; he had been hastily despatched on some errand, the nature of which will speedily transpire.

Nothing could exceed the grandeur of Venetia's beauty at this moment. Her splendid form was drawn up to the full of its noble height, and, as her carriage now seemed statuesque as that of a sculptured Juno, by her shoulders being thrown back and her head being held erect, her superb bust displayed its ample development to the fullest advantage. Upheaved in its luxuriant proportions, it seemed

ready to burst through the drapery that outlined its swelling contours; while the glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, dilating nostrils, and lips apart, threw the spell of an almost Olympian majesty upon her transcending charms.

Every one present, save Sackville, started from his seat as the beauteous lady and her formidable-looking companion made their appearance; while Horace himself rose gently and leisurely, his features now illumined with the radiance of approaching triumph. As for Colonel Malpas, guilt and cowardice were as legibly depicted upon his ashy cheeks and in his affrighted looks as ever the words themselves were printed on the page of a volume.

"Your Royal Highness, my lords, gentlemen," said Venetia, in a tone which, though firm, was filled with all the flutelike harmony of her soul-seeking voice, "you have listened to the tale of accusation: now do me the justice to hear the defence."

"Most assuredly!" exclaimed the prince regent. "My lord," he added, turning toward Leveson, "whatever disappointment you may have experienced relative to this lady, justice must be done her. You are the chairman of the meeting, and I know you will do your duty."

"Beyond all doubt," said the marquis, who was so dazzled and overpowered by the enchanting loveliness and Juno-like majesty of Venetia's appearance that he forgot all the resentment excited by the scene which had occurred at his own house, he no longer remembered the incidents of the treacherous chair, but he felt suddenly inclined to do anything or everything on behalf of that woman of superhuman charms. "Let us all be seated," he exclaimed. "Horace, hand your wife a chair, and Captain Tash — "

But the gallant officer had already dropped into a seat and was stretching forth his hand to grasp the nearest decanter, before the marquis had time to utter another syllable. The captain likewise drew toward him three or four dishes of cakes and fruits; and as he began to eat and drink with as much coolness and absence of restraint as if the house were his own, he said, "Go on, my lord; I can always hear best when profitably employed."

Malpas made a last effort to assume an air of confidence; and by way of conciliating the formidable captain, whom he knew to be his enemy, but whose presence on this occasion

he could not account for, he said, "Make yourself at home, and don't spare the wine."

"Mrs. Sackville," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, "we are ready to hear you."

"It will be sufficient for me, my lord," answered Venetia, "simply but emphatically to deny the calumnious aspersion thrown upon me by Colonel Malpas. My husband is the proper person to conduct my defence."

"First of all, then," said Horace Sackville, "I shall request Captain Tash to state whatever he knows of the interview between Colonel Malpas and my wife at Lady Wenlock's."

"With much pleasure," observed the gallant officer, filling a tumbler with port wine and draining it at a draught, — for he contemptuously eschewed the paltry size of an ordinary wine-glass. "On the particular Wednesday night alluded to by Colonel Malpas, — for I must tell you that I have been listening outside the door to everything he has been saying, — myself and my man Robin, who is a faithful creature, were concealed amongst the bushes in Lady Wenlock's grounds. Why we were there, doesn't matter," he continued, darting a sly look at Lord Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon; "it is enough to state that we were there. It is true that Mrs. Arbuthnot and her daughter walked on in advance; but it is also true that Mrs. Sackville, as the then Miss Trelawney now is, treated the colonel with mingled scorn, contempt, raillery, and defiance, according to the variations of language which he adopted toward her. He hinted at some conspiracy that was set on foot against her, and declared that his own most intimate friends were engaged in it. He informed her that she was the object of a wager on the part of some base and infamous voluptuaries. Those were his very words. He heard a rustling in the evergreens, and was startled. Ah! he little thought that Rolando Tash," added the captain, with a look of terrible ferocity upon the pale, trembling, and speechless colonel, "was concealed in the evergreens, like — like — an owl in an ivy-bush."

Here the gallant officer paused, and tossed off another tumbler of port wine.

"Well, my lord," he continued, addressing himself to the marquis, "the colonel proceeded to threaten Miss Tre-

lawney — Mrs. Sackville, I mean — in a frightful manner. My hair, though well oiled and curling naturally, stood on end. He told her that unless she yielded to his wishes, he would persecute her by all manner of means, destroy her reputation, whisper to one and breathe in the ears of another that she was his mistress, ay, and even forge letters with her name appended, to prove his tale. He gave her two weeks to deliberate — "

" Enough, Captain Tash," said Lord Leveson. " I think," he added, glancing around the table, " that we need not allow Mrs. Sackville's ears to be offended with a further recapitulation of these atrocities."

" Certainly not," exclaimed the prince regent, red with indignation. " Sit down, Tash, like a good fellow, and drink your wine."

" Here's a bumper, then, to your Royal Highness," said the captain, refilling his tumbler and tossing off the contents. " And inasmuch as my lord marquis is an excellent chairman, I drink a bumper to him also," suiting the action to the word. " And forasmuch as we have a beautiful lady present, I drink a bumper to her health in particular and that of the sex in general, for I don't know what the devil we should do without them." Then, having drained the tumbler and refilling it, he observed, " But it would be bad manners on my part not to drink to the other lords and gentlemen present — "

How long Captain Tash would have gone on with his succession of bumpers and healths, it is difficult to say; but he was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of Robin, leading in Mrs. Gale of Soho Square.

A half-stifled groan now burst from the lips of Colonel Malpas, who saw that no chance remained for him, but that every available incident had been pressed into the service of his opponents. Discomfited, crushed, almost annihilated, he sat ghastly and trembling in his chair, unable to speak a word, a wretched, wretched example of mingled guilt, cowardice, and despair.

Mrs. Gale was evidently much frightened at being brought into the presence of this formidable conclave; and Robin whispered to Captain Tash that if he had not menaced her with a constable, she would not have come at all. She now confessed, after some hesitation, and with many prayers

for pardon, that she had been induced to draw up and sign the certificate, which was dictated by Colonel Malpas, on condition of receiving the immediate payment of a sum of money owing to her by him. She added that the certificate was not drawn up on the day specified by the date, but some days later; and she admitted that Mrs. Sackville had never visited her establishment at all. She was then permitted to retire.

But scarcely had she left the room, when the footman entered to inform Colonel Malpas that he was wanted for a moment on very particular business.

" You must come back immediately, sir," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, sternly.

The colonel murmured a faint " Yes," and hastily quitted the room in a state of mind not even enviable by a person about to be hanged.

On stepping into the hall, he was confronted by two individuals whose looks proclaimed their errand. One was a person of the Hebrew nation, with a cutaway coat, knee-breeches, and top-boots. He wore a spotted neckerchief with an enormous pin, a bunch of gold seals dangled from his fob, and his silk handkerchief hung half-way out of his coat pocket. His companion was a stout, elderly, shabby man, carrying a huge stick, or rather bludgeon. He wore a greatcoat buttoned over his chest, a white hat with a mourning band, and very clumsy boots.

Malpas, upon finding himself face to face with these worthies, clenched his fists in a paroxysm of rage; and then, as the Hebrew gentleman produced a writ, the miserable colonel staggered back and sank upon a chair.

" Five tousand guinish ish de sum, and tree guinish ish de expensh, colonel," said the bailiff, for such he was. " Dis leetle writ ish at de shoot of Mishter Emmershon. My name ish Ikey — Moshes Ikey, at your servish; and my housh ish in Fetter Lane. Tom, keep de door."

" All right," growled the bailiff's man, planting his back against the front door.

" Thunder and lightning! " roared Captain Tash, now bursting forth from the dining-room, inside the door of which he had been listening to what was passing in the hall, " the colonel's going to quod, but he must not escape condign punishment. You sneaking, paltry, cowardly villain! "

he exclaimed, springing toward Malpas and seizing him by the nose, " you are the greatest cur and the clumsiest villain I ever knew in all my life! So take that — and that — and this — and this — and that — and that! "

And, suiting the actions to the words, the redoubtable Rolando dragged the shrieking, yelling colonel ignominiously by the nose around the hall, bestowing upon him sundry boxes on the ears and sidelong kicks on the breech by way of chastisement. Then suddenly releasing his victim, Captain Tash gave him one parting kick which sent him flying across the hall and ultimately sprawling on the door-mat.

The whole party, Venetia excepted, had in the meantime crowded at the entrance of the dining-room to witness this scene, which excited peals of laughter; and when it was over, they returned to their seats, Captain Tash resuming his own chair and addressing himself again to the fruit and wine as calmly and composedly as if nothing had happened.

Then, while Colonel Malpas, crushed and confounded, was taking his departure in company with Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom, the Marquis of Leveson said, " We had better conclude our business at once and leave the house of a vile impostor as soon as we can."

" But where is Robin? " inquired Sackville. " Surely we may offer him a glass of wine? "

" Oh, there he is," observed Tash, coolly; and as every eye was directed toward the point indicated by the gallant officer, a portion of Robin's form and the tip of his nose were seen betwixt the opening of the window-curtains.

It was with great difficulty he could be persuaded to come forth and drink some wine; and when he had tossed off the contents of a glass which Sackville handed him, he glided back again to his lurking-place, now completely disappearing behind the curtains.

" We have heard an infamous accusation triumphantly refuted," said the Marquis of Leveson; " and if further evidence had been required on behalf of Mrs. Sackville, his Royal Highness and myself could have supplied it. For on that very Friday night which the coward scoundrel and vile cheat named as the period of his alleged success, and between the specified hours of nine and eleven, his Royal Highness and I can declare that we were each honoured by a visit from Mrs. Sackville, then Miss Trelawney; and we both emphatically

repeat what we proclaimed ere now, that we had neither of us any reason to imitate the presumptuous assertions of Colonel Malpas."

"My lord," said Venetia, her voice now sounding tremulously for the first time since she had entered the room, "I have every reason to thank you for the noble candour and impartiality with which you have conducted these proceedings." Then, her countenance suddenly lighting up with the irradiation of good-humoured archness, she observed, as she rose from her seat, "Permit me to express a hope that the next time you agree to lay wagers relative to the result of a love-campaign, you will take care whom you admit into the compact and trust with the secret. Otherwise you may chance to be dishonoured by the companionship of another Colonel Malpas."

Having thus spoken with a charming air of good-natured remonstrance, she bowed and moved toward the door. The Prince of Wales instantaneously sprang forward to open it for her; and as Venetia passed him, he whispered, tenderly, "Does our compact hold good, my angel?"

"It does," she replied, in her softest tone. "Next Monday evening, nine o'clock, Carlton House."

And darting upon him a look of profound meaning, she issued from the room. The prince, scarcely able to conceal the joy inspired by this response, returned to his seat; and as the screen had hidden Venetia and himself from the view of the assembled guests during that hurried interchange of whispers, the circumstance passed unnoticed.

"We have now," said the Marquis of Leveson, "but one more matter of business to dispose of, and that is to decide who has won the sweepstakes of six thousand guineas. I think there cannot be a doubt upon the subject; and with your concurrence, my friends, I shall hand over the amount to Mr. Horace Sackville."

This proposal was agreed to, and the bank-notes, together with the purse of sovereigns, were passed around the table to Venetia's husband.

Horace consigned the notes to his pocket, saying, "I thank you all for helping me to a wife and a fortune. As for this purse, I must beg Captain Tash to accept it."

"It is in the nature of gifts that I never refuse," exclaimed the gallant officer. "And now," he continued, rising

from his seat and lifting a tumbler of wine to his lips, "I must drink to the health of my friend, Mr. Sackville, and long life to him! But as it would be rude not to pay my respects to Sir Douglas Huntingdon," he went on to say, refilling the tumbler he had just emptied, "I must drink to his health." Then, after draining the glass, and while replenishing it, he added, "Likewise the Right Honourable the Earl of Curzon;" and after another brief pause, during which he poured the draught down his capacious throat, he said, "Forasmuch as there is but another tumblerful in the decanter, it would be a pity not to dispose of it to advantage, and so I will drink it to the health of any whom such health may concern."

The prince, the Marquis of Leveson, the earl, and Sir Douglas had all drunk quite enough to be in a humour to laugh heartily at Captain Tash's freaks; nor was Horace, though far more temperate, and indeed perfectly sober, inclined to be less jovial on the occasion. But so soon as the gallant officer had exhausted all the wine as well as his catalogue of excuses for disposing of it, Sackville bade his friends good night and left the room. Venetia was waiting for him in another apartment, to which the accommodating butler had shown her; and before the newly married couple took their departure in the carriage that was waiting for them, they informed Mr. Plumpstead that he might enter their service at Acacia Cottage on the morrow.

The carriages of the other guests were soon announced, the party broke up, and when Mrs. Malpas returned home from her plebeian relatives in the City, she heard that her husband had been soundly thrashed in the first place and taken away to a sponging-house afterward.

CHAPTER X

THE TRIAL

On the morning that succeeded the incidents just related, the court-house of the Old Bailey was thronged to excess; for Mr. Paul Dysart was to stand his trial on the charge of feloniously killing and slaying the Honourable George Sefton. A second count in the indictment accused him of fighting a duel and thereby breaking his Majesty's peace, — although, be it observed, his Majesty was a hopeless lunatic at the time and much more likely to break the peace himself than preserve it. Such, however, was the legal fiction and phraseology; and Mr. Dysart was arraigned accordingly.

His wife, Lady Ernestina, was not in court; but she was close at hand, — indeed, warming herself comfortably by the fire in the drawing-room of the governor of Newgate. She was a lady of rank, and was therefore thus courteously treated by the governor. Had she been a poor man's wife, she would have had to stand all day in the open street, or else at the public-house opposite the court, unless, indeed, she had chosen to be present during the trial.

But while the fiction of the so-called British Constitution declares that all persons are equal in the eye of the law, the administrators, functionaries, and officials of the law take very good care that such shall not be the case. Thus, inasmuch as several of the witnesses engaged in the present case were of aristocratic birth, they were accommodated with seats upon the bench; and Lord Herbert, the principal witness, sat next to the recorder and chatted familiarly with him while the clerk was swearing the jury. Now, had the witnesses been costermongers or tinkers, or any other individuals belonging to the working class, they would not have dared approach the sacred limit of the judicial bench.

Moreover, as Mr. Dysart had married into an aristocratic family, he was accommodated with a chair in the dock; and the turnkey who had charge of him was desired by the governor not to stand too near "the unfortunate gentleman." We may also observe that during the whole trial he was never spoken of, either by judge, counsel, or witnesses, otherwise than as Mr. Dysart; whereas, had he been a working man, the said judge, counsel, and witnesses would not have thought of speaking of him otherwise than as the prisoner, or the accused. Such a fortunate thing is it to be either rich or else connected with the aristocracy in this country!

Ah! poor working men, sons and daughters of toil, producers of everything and consumers of almost nothing, ye scarcely seem to know how utterly, completely, and entirely ye are oppressed, enslaved, and trampled upon by the arrogant, indolent, and tyrannical aristocracy.

Mr. Dysart, on entering the dock, bowed politely to the judge and jury, and then seated himself with an air of confidence and composure; for he felt assured that even if the jury should find him guilty of the most aggravated charge, and the bench should thereupon doom him to death, the prince regent would accord him a full pardon. He was therefore comparatively easy in his mind, looking upon the present ordeal as a great annoyance, but by no means as a predicament of terrible danger.

The jury having been sworn, and the recorder having finished laughing at the joke which Lord Herbert had just whispered in the judicial ear, the trial commenced. The attorney-general appeared to prosecute; and he contented himself with a mere outline of the case, very considerately abstaining from emphasis on the strongest points, and putting the weakest prominently forward, as if he were actually furnishing the jury with an excuse to acquit the prisoner. But on the previous day he had prosecuted a working man for sedition; and then how he exaggerated every minute detail and by his eloquence invested the feeblest point with an overwhelming power to crush the accused! But Mr. Dysart had married the niece of the Marquis of Leveson, and so the attorney-general did not wish to send him to the scaffold.

The law-officer having opened the case, Lord Herbert was

sworn as a witness. He did not leave his place on the bench near the recorder, neither did he rise from his seat, but gave his evidence as comfortably as if lounging in his own drawing-room. He was a tall, thin man, of about fifty-five years of age, with iron-gray hair, and a sprawling, awkward, uncouth figure. He was immensely vain, outrageously arrogant, fond of hearing himself talk, and yet as empty-headed as lords generally are. He had a habit of hesitating so much in his speech that it seemed like a natural impediment, and made it painful to listen to him. In fact, he was a shallow-pated numskull; and if he had not been an aristocrat, would have been written down an ass.

"I believe, my lord," said the attorney-general, "you are acquainted with Mr. Dysart, the gentleman whose case is under investigation?"

"Haw — hem — ah — oh, yes, perfectly well acquainted with Mr. Dysart," responded Lord Herbert, crossing one leg over the other.

"And I believe your lordship gave a grand entertainment to a party of noblemen and gentlemen in the beginning of June, of the present year?"

"Hem — hah — haw — oh, yes, a dinner-party."

"At which Mr. Dysart was present?"

"Haw — ay — yes — haw — Mr. Dysart was present — he — haw."

"And the lamented deceased, the Honourable George Sefton, was likewise of the party?"

"Eh — haw — hem — oh, yes — George Sefton — haw — hem — was there."

"I believe that when the cloth was removed and the dessert was placed upon the table, a dispute arose upon some matter?"

"Oh — ah — hem — a dispute about Tantivy, the winner — haw — of the Oaks — hem — and also about Old Fogey, another crack racer — haw."

"And Mr. Dysart gave the Honourable George Sefton the lie, I believe?"

"Hem — hah — yes — I'm afraid he did. Then, you know, high words — hem — haw — ensued — and Mr. Dysart flung a glass of wine in Sefton's face — haw — haw — and Sefton flew into a rage — haw — and I don't know how it was — haw — or how it came about exactly — hem —

hem — but pistols were talked of — and — and — and — pistols were got — haw — haw — and then — yes, then — "

"Pray don't hurry yourself, my lord," said the judge; "there's plenty of time, and we have got the whole day before us."

"Oh, certainly," observed the attorney-general. "Your lordship was explaining, with your lordship's wonted clearness and perspicuity, how pistols were obtained."

"Ah — yes — haw — truly," exclaimed the nobleman, lolling back in his seat and running his fingers complaisantly through his hair, which stood upright all over his head. "Well, as I was saying, then — haw — he — haw — it was proposed to fight — hem — hah — across the table, and I believe — I'm afraid — hem — haw — I'm afraid Mr. Dysart fired — hem — before the signal — haw — was given. Sefton fell dead — haw — 'twas a bad business — haw — and that's all I know — hem — of the matter."

And having thus given his evidence, Lord Herbert indulged in a long yawn, stretching out his sprawling legs till every joint cracked audibly.

Dysart's counsel rose to cross-examine the nobleman; but the attorney-general threw a deprecatory look upon him; and the barrister, fearful of giving offence to the great law-officer as well as to the judge upon the bench, contented himself by asking some trivial question just to save appearances, and resumed his seat.

The Honourable George Macnamara, who sat next to Lord Herbert, now gave his testimony to the following purport:

"I remember the entertainment at my Lord Herbert's. It was in the beginning of June. About twelve or fourteen noblemen and gentlemen were present. I was one of the guests, Mr. Dysart was another, and the Honourable George Sefton was likewise there. A dispute arose relative to Tantivy and Old Fogey. These horses both belonged to Mr. Sefton; and Mr. Dysart was understood to have bet heavily upon them. From a word that Mr. Sefton let fall, Mr. Dysart fancied that he did not mean the horses to run; and he called him a scoundrel and a cheat. Mr. Sefton called him a liar. We were all pretty jolly — I may, indeed, say we were all drunk. Lord Herbert was certainly not sober. Mr. Dysart challenged Mr. Sefton to a duel across the table, and Lord

Herbert produced his pistols. Seconds were appointed, and it was agreed that at a given signal the hostile parties should fire. This took place in Lord Herbert's dining-room. Mr. Dysart and Mr. Sefton received the pistols at the same moment, and Mr. Dysart instantaneously discharged his pistol pointblank at Mr. Sefton. The signal was not given at all. Mr. Sefton uttered a cry, sprang straight up at least a foot from the floor, and then dropped dead. I am bound to say that Mr. Dysart, when he fired, exclaimed, 'Take that, you young villain!' or words to the same effect."

The Honourable George Macnamara, not being a peer, was subjected to some little cross-examination; but his testimony was not shaken in the slightest degree.

Lieutenant Apsley, who was also one of the party at Lord Herbert's house, was next summoned as a witness; and he not only corroborated Mr. Macnamara's evidence, but clearly proved that Dysart could not possibly have fired in the mistaken belief that the signal was given. For this signal was to consist of the words, "One — two — three," deliberately uttered, and at the last word the duellists were to fire; whereas Mr. Dysart had discharged his pistol before even the first word of the signal was spoken.

Some other evidence was given, and the case for the prosecution closed.

The prisoner's counsel made as able a speech as the damnatory nature of the evidence and his own fears of offending the "bigwigs" would allow; but he entirely glossed over the startling fact which had come out in Macnamara's evidence, namely, that Lord Herbert had supplied the pistols. Not that the point would have helped Dysart's case at all; still it was one which a conscientious barrister, unawed by the frowns of the bench, would not have failed to touch upon.

Having concluded his speech, the counsel for the defence called several witnesses to prove that Mr. Dysart was one of the mildest, most forbearing, amiable, and good-tempered men in the whole world; and inasmuch as the said witnesses (none of whom had ever seen Dysart before in their lives) had been paid ten pounds apiece to give him this brilliant character, it must be allowed that they could not well attribute to him fewer virtues considering how handsomely they were remunerated for their trouble.

The attorney-general rose to reply. He began by remark-

ing that never in the whole course of his professional career had it been his good fortune to listen to evidence so lucidly, clearly, intelligibly, and impartially given as that of Lord Herbert, — one of the brightest ornaments of that great and glorious aristocracy which was the pride, the glory, and the ornament of this free, happy, and enlightened country. It was a pleasure (continued the attorney-general) to behold a man of Lord Herbert's rank, leaving his sumptuous mansion at the West End, and cheerfully coming down to a public tribunal to further the ends and assist the aims of justice. It had been stated in the evidence of Mr. Macnamara that the party of noblemen and gentlemen assembled at Lord Herbert's mansion on the melancholy occasion alluded to had indulged somewhat freely in the use of the grape; but surely a little excess in this manner was not to be wondered at, when it was considered how heavily the legislative duties attached to the noble lord's proud position as a peer of the realm must at times press upon his lordship.

As the newspapers said next day, "the learned attorney-general then went carefully over the evidence;" but so carefully did the learned gentleman perform this part of his duty that he pretty nearly told the jury, at least in terms as plain as he dared venture upon, that they would do well to acquit Mr. Dysart.

The learned recorder, who had been fast asleep during the attorney-general's closing speech, now woke up; and, turning to his notes, he proceeded to sum up the case to the jury. Imitating the example of the prisoner's counsel and the attorney-general, the learned judge made not the slightest allusion to the fact that Lord Herbert had provided his own pistols for the duellists, and had allowed so scandalous a scene to take place at his own mansion and in his own dining-room; much less did the learned recorder think of telling this same Lord Herbert that he ought to have been included in the indictment, as an accessory to the crime for which the prisoner was then in the presence of the jury. No such thing. But the judge did also imitate the attorney-general by travelling out of his way to eulogize Lord Herbert in particular and the aristocracy in general; and he further took a leaf out of the attorney-general's book by hinting that the best thing the jury could do would be to acquit Mr. Dysart.

The jury, however, seemed to take quite a different view of the matter; so that without much deliberation, and also without leaving the box, they returned a verdict of wilful murder against Paul Dysart.

Every eye was turned upon the prisoner to behold how he received the record which heralded the crowning act in the drama, namely, the condemnation to death. A sudden pallor overspread his features, as if a spasm convulsed him at the moment; but the next instant he was calm, collected, and confident as before. It was at first a frightful shock to be found guilty of murder, the bare mention of which terrible word was enough to make the gallows and all the dread paraphernalia of death spring up before his startled imagination; but this feeling was promptly relieved by the recollection that his wife held a document which could compel the prince regent to open the doors of his dungeon and recall him forth to freedom.

The recorder put on the black cap, and in the usual stereotyped form of verbiage pronounced the awful sentence of the law, which was that Paul Dysart should be taken back to the place whence he came, and thence to a place of execution, where he should be hung by the neck until he was dead; and the recorder concluded by expressing a hope that the Lord would have mercy upon his soul.

Execrable imposture! vile barbarism! diabolical iniquity! Man proves merciless in his vengeance, and yet hopes that God will be merciful. But should not man follow the example of this Almighty Power whom he invokes?

It was now four o'clock in the afternoon. Dysart was conveyed back to Newgate, the recorder went to dine with Lord Herbert, the common-sergeant took his place upon the bench, and the trial of petty felons occupied the rest of the evening. The crowd dispersed, each individual remarking to his friend, " I wonder when he will be hung."

Meantime the governor of Newgate proceeded to his drawing-room, where Lady Ernestina was seated; and, inasmuch as it suited her purpose to manifest the deepest anxiety relative to the result of the trial, he fancied it to be incumbent upon him to break the tidings as gently as possible. Then she fell into a strong fit; and when she had performed this little piece of tragedy, she wildly demanded to see her dear, dear husband!

The governor accordingly conducted Lady Ernestina to Dysart's cell; and precipitating herself into his arms, she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses. The governor retired; and then the lady grew calmer. Dysart was completely deceived by her manner, her words, her looks, and her tears; and he fancied she experienced a return of all that enthusiastic affection which had formerly induced her to become his wife.

"I don't altogether deserve so much kindness at your hands, Ernestina," he said; "but I'll make up for the past when once I am out of this cursed place. Don't cry, the annoyance and vexation are only temporary — "

"But to think that such a dreadful sentence should ever have been passed!" exclaimed Ernestina, with a simulation of the profoundest emotion.

"Well, we were not altogether unprepared for it, — at least I was not," said her husband; "and, thank Heaven, you have got a talisman which will speedily open these prison doors. Ah! how surprised the prince will be to find that the lady of his romantic adventure at Beechy Manor is none other than the niece of his intimate friend the Marquis of Leveson!"

"And when shall I communicate with his Royal Highness?" asked Ernestina. "Since I have returned to my uncle's residence, he has not once called."

"You must see the prince to-morrow, Ernestina," said Dysart, impressively. "There is no time to be lost. The recorder will make his report next week."

"Yes, I will see the prince to-morrow, if possible," observed Lady Dysart. "Shall I go to Carlton House, or write and beg an interview?"

"Whichever you think advisable. But of course his Royal Highness can do nothing officially until after he has received the recorder's report; before that report is made, the prince is supposed to know nothing of the case. But privately it will be as well not only to prepare him for what he will have to do, but also to exact from him a promise that he will comply with the terms of the solemn compact he has signed."

"Yes, I will see him to-morrow, Paul," said Ernestina; "and afterward, if it be not too late, I will hasten hither with the particulars of our interview."

"And if it should be too late to-morrow evening, you will come early on the following day?" said Dysart, interrogatively.

"Ah! I shall be only too glad to bring you good news," she answered, apparently with much emotion. "But the result cannot be otherwise, for the prince regent must and shall fulfil the terms of his compact."

"It rests only with you to compel him," observed Dysart. Then, in a solemn tone, he added, "Remember, Ernestina, my life is in your hands."

"And I will save it," she exclaimed, flinging herself into his arms.

She then took leave of her husband; and as she returned in a hackney-coach to Leveson House in Albemarle Street, she said to herself, "All suspicion on his part is lulled asleep; he places the fullest confidence in me, and I must manage to retain it until the very last."

Then, as she threw herself back in the vehicle, she felt a cold shudder thrill through her form at the thought that if her plans were carried out with success, the ground which she had just passed over in the Old Bailey would in a few short days be covered with a densely packed multitude to witness the crowning catastrophe in Dysart's career; but, angry with herself the next moment for giving way to what she deemed a weakness, she murmured, "Yes, it is necessary; I must be rid of this demon whom I conjured up to torment me. Ah! it is the tenderest love which turns to the bitterest hatred and seeks for the most terrible vengeance."

On arriving in Albemarle Street Ernestina was informed that her uncle the marquis was engaged with Mrs. Owen of Richmond; and she was therefore compelled to wait till this lady had taken her departure, before she could see Lord Leveson. We may observe that Ernestina knew nothing of the conspiracy that had been hatched against the Princess of Wales, and in which the three oldest Misses Owen were engaged; and she therefore attributed her uncle's intimacy with the mother of those young ladies to an affair of gallantry.

The marquis and Mrs. Owen remained in private discussion together for nearly an hour; and at the expiration of this interval, when the lady had taken her departure, Ernestina

had an opportunity of communicating to her noble uncle the result of the trial at the Old Bailey.

"Now, then, Ernestina," he said, with a look of deep meaning, "you will be enabled to carry out your projects, as you have explained them to me."

"I shall, my dear uncle," she responded; "but they will require the utmost tact and caution, and I must continue to play the hypocrite toward Dysart with such consummate skill —"

"Which you will be enabled to do, Ernestina," added the marquis, who seemed to be in a desperate hurry about something. "But I must leave you to work out these schemes by yourself, for I am compelled to undertake a journey to France."

"To France!" exclaimed Lady Dysart, in astonishment.

"Yes, and without delay, too, on very important business indeed," said the marquis. "I have ordered my travelling-carriage and shall depart in an hour, the moment I have eaten a mouthful of dinner."

"You will travel all night, then?" said Ernestina. "It is now past seven o'clock."

"Yes, I shall travel without stopping to Dover, where I hope to arrive at about three in the morning. I can then snatch a few hours' sleep, and sail by the packet-boat at ten or eleven. Let us sit down to dinner, then, for I am sure you must be in want of refreshment after so exciting and disagreeable a day."

"Not disagreeable as to the result of the trial," observed Lady Dysart, significantly.

The uncle and niece now repaired to the dining-room, where they continued their discourse as they partook of the repast, until a domestic announced that the travelling-carriage was in readiness. The marquis then took an affectionate leave of his niece, in whose hands he placed a cheque for a sum of money to meet her wants during his absence; and in a few minutes he was whirled as rapidly away as four post-horses and a lightly constructed vehicle could bear him.

Ernestina remained alone in the dining-room, pondering upon the various circumstances which had occurred within the last few weeks, and revolving in her mind the plans and

projects which they had been so fertile in suggesting. In this manner an hour slipped away, and the clock had struck nine, when a footman entered to announce that a person wished to speak to her ladyship upon a matter of some importance.

"A person! Who is it?" she ejaculated, impatiently.

"A man, your ladyship; but he refuses to give his name or state his business."

"Perhaps it is the marquis whom he wants."

"No, my lady; I told him that his lordship had just left London, and he said it was to your ladyship he wished to speak."

"Then show him in," exclaimed Ernestina, wondering who the individual could be.

The domestic bowed and withdrew, but almost immediately returned, ushering in a man dressed in a coarse style, with a great thick coat, a neckerchief drawn up to his mouth, and a broad-brimmed hat in his hand. The servant retired, the man advanced, and as the light fell upon his features, Ernestina instantaneously recognized the individual who had dug the grave for her paramour.

CHAPTER XI

UNPLEASANT VISITORS

A COLD chill fell upon the lady, as if her flesh had suddenly come in contact with the slimy coils of a serpent, and the colour fled from her cheeks. She was struck as if with an omen of evil, for the appearance of this man, whom she only knew by the name of Jones, and which name she believed to be an assumed one, was indeed but too well calculated of itself, apart from any repugnant associations connected with him, to arouse a mortal terror in her soul.

"What do you want? What do you require?" she demanded, in a voice that was nearly suffocated by her emotions.

"I just want to have a few words with your ladyship, that's all," said the man; and advancing toward the fire, he coolly and deliberately took a seat.

Ernestina fell back in the chair from which she had started on his entrance; but composing herself as well as she was able, she made a sign for him to continue.

"Your husband, ma'am — I mean your ladyship's husband," he resumed, endeavouring to give his hangdog countenance an insinuating look, "has got himself into a precious scrape, and if he don't mind he'll be a croaker before ten days are over."

"But what do you want with me?" demanded Ernestina, impatiently.

"I'll explain myself all in good time," he continued. "If you're in a hurry, I'm not particularly so — and there's the difference. Besides, you shouldn't look so precious glum at an old acquaintance. I suppose you know it was me that got up the expedition that night when the prince and the marquis were taken to the manor; and of course you

know it was me that dug the grave at the Blackheath villa. Well, I was treated like a genelman by your ladyship's husband; he paid me handsome, and now I want to serve him. That's the object of my business."

"But who are you?" demanded Ernestina, who had shuddered visibly when the wretch alluded to the digging of the grave.

"Ah! I recollect," exclaimed the man. "Mr. Dysart told me when I was at Beechey Manor that you only knew me by the name of Jones. Nevertheless, my name is no more Jones than your ladyship's is; and as there's no use for any disguise or concealment that I can see, I may as well explain to you at once that my proper name is Dan'el Coffin —"

"What! the public executioner!" cried the miserable lady, springing to her feet and gazing upon the man with horror depicted upon her countenance. Then, as the account of the burglary at Mrs. Owen's, which she had read in the newspapers, flashed to her mind, she instantaneously understood the circumstances in which Daniel Coffin had sought refuge at Beechey Manor with the pseudonym of Jones.

"Don't alarm yourself, ma'am," said Coffin, with imperturbable coolness; "I ain't come to hang you. But pray sit down again; you see I make myself at home, because I want to speak to you on very particular business, and the more you won't hear me, the longer you'll keep me."

Struck by the truth of this remark, and anxious to get rid of her dreadful visitor as soon as possible, Ernestina reseated herself, and again made a hurried motion for him to continue.

"Well, my lady," resumed Coffin, "as I was observing just now, Mr. Dysart has got into a precious hobble, and as the recorder will make his report at the beginning of next week, it will be all dickey with your husband ten days hence if so be nothing's done in the meantime. Now as I've watched Old Bailey cases for some years past, and am pretty familiar with 'em, I can tell your ladyship that there's no hope of a reprieve, much less of pardon, seeing the jury didn't recommend him to mercy. It's clear, then, — and there's no use in deceiving oneself, — that he'll be scragged on Monday week; and so, as I've a great respect for him, I

want to know what you'll give if I help him to escape out of Newgate."

"Escape!" cried Ernestina, recoiling from the bare idea of a result which would fatally frustrate all her plans.

"Ah! you may well be astonished at such a proposal, ma'am," said Coffin, entirely mistaking the cause of her sudden start and emphatic exclamation. "But I don't think it's altogether impossible. At least it's worth while to have a try for it. You see that as your husband's a genelman and connected with the aristocracy, he will be allowed many indulgences which poor devils in trouble couldn't obtain for either love or money; and as you can visit him without being searched, you can easily take him a file and a jimmy. A jimmy, ma'am, is a small crowbar, — a very handy thing at times, as genelmen of the crack and pannie profession well know. It's the best thing to open a shop with, ma'am, a capital stock in trade, as one may say, for an enterprising individual anxious to set hisself up in business. Well, my lady, if Mr. Dysart can get out of the condemned crib and manage to reach the roof of the Stone Jug, or even let himself into one of the yards, I could have a party of leary chaps all in readiness outside to help him to do the rest; and then, a post-chaise and four spanking horses being close at hand — "

"I thank you," interrupted Ernestina, who had listened thus far with the tortures of impatience, "but your proposal cannot be accepted. My uncle, the Marquis of Leveson, has written a strong and appealing letter to the prince regent on my unfortunate husband's behalf, and I have every hope and confidence therein. But should Mr. Dysart endeavour to escape and be caught in the fact, all chance of reprieve or pardon would be frustrated. I shall give you five guineas for your trouble in calling upon me — "

But scarcely had Ernestina taken out her purse as she thus spoke, when the footman entered the room, saying, "Mr. Lawrence Sampson wishes to speak to your ladyship."

Coffin had started up the instant the handle of the door was heard to turn, and thus the domestic did not observe that he had been previously sitting in a familiar manner in Lady Ernestina Dysart's company. But when the terrible name of the Bow Street officer was mentioned, the Hangman became visibly troubled. Ernestina saw in a moment

that a scene was to be avoided in the presence of the footman; and, with admirable composure, she immediately said, "Show Mr. Sampson into the adjoining room."

The domestic retired; and the instant the door closed behind him, the lady said, in a hurried, altered, and even hollow tone, "Do you think he has tracked you hither?"

"It looks like it," answered Coffin. "And yet, if he had, he wouldn't send in to say he wanted to speak to you, but he would make a rush of it at once with his runners, or else lie in wait in the street till I went out again."

"But what on earth can he want with me?" said the lady, trembling from head to foot, the thought of the tragedy at the Blackheath villa being uppermost in her mind.

"Oh, he doesn't want you, ma'am, for any harm," returned Daniel Coffin; "or else he'd have come bang in and have taken you at once. I'm up to all the dodges of these rum customers. Most likely, after all, he's got a scent of me; and not being quite sure of it, is come to ask whether such a genelman as Mr. Dan'el Coffin has paid your ladyship a visit this evening. You'd better not keep him waiting."

"No, it would be imprudent," said Ernestina. Then, somewhat reassured by the observations of the Hangman relative to herself, she placed the five guineas upon the table, observing, "You can leave the house quietly in a few moments."

She then quitted the apartment; and summoning all her courage to her aid, she entered the adjoining room, where Mr. Sampson rose from a seat and made her a profound salutation.

"Your ladyship will pardon me for intruding at this late hour, and at a moment when your ladyship's grief must be so acute after the sad result of to-day," began the officer; "but I am sure that when I mention the object of my intrusion, and when I add that I shall not detain your ladyship three minutes —"

"You need not apologize, Mr. Sampson," interrupted Ernestina, now regaining complete confidence, as she felt assured that neither his manner nor his words denoted a hostile intent. "I am indeed overwhelmed with sorrow; but you must not think that I bear any ill will toward yourself. I know that in arresting my husband, you only did your duty."

"Thank your ladyship for that acknowledgment," said the officer.

"Be seated, Mr. Sampson," continued Ernestina, affably motioning toward a chair, but principally exhibiting this courtesy in order to gain sufficient time to enable Daniel Coffin to effect a safe retreat from the house; then, as she herself took a seat, she said, "And now, Mr. Sampson, you can explain the purpose of your visit."

As Ernestina spoke, she affected a profound mournfulness; and now she held her handkerchief to her face as if to conceal her tears on account of her husband, but really to veil the emotion which she might experience in case Sampson addressed her upon any unpleasant topic. And it was well that she took this precaution; for the very first words which he proceeded to utter in explanation of his visit sent the blood with an ice-chill to her heart and made her entire form thrill with horror and alarm.

"Your ladyship is probably aware that in the month of June last Sir Archibald Malvern, a baronet living in Hanover Square, disappeared suddenly and in a most mysterious manner. His son, Mr. Valentine, — or Sir Valentine, as he ought perhaps to be called, — entrusted to me the duty of making all possible researches to ascertain the fate of his parent; but my proceedings and inquiries in the matter have hitherto proved completely abortive. This evening, however, an incident has transpired which seems to throw a glimmer of light, faint and feeble, it is true, upon the occurrence."

"But how can this possibly regard me, Mr. Sampson?" inquired Ernestina, anxious to be relieved from the tortures of an excruciating suspense; and removing her handkerchief from her face, she threw a hurried glance upon him; then, perceiving that there was nothing ominous in his looks nor manner, she felt her courage revive.

"It does not regard your ladyship," was the answer; "but it may regard Mr. Dysart."

"Good heavens! surely you would not attribute to him the perpetration of such a crime!" exclaimed Ernestina. "Is he not sufficiently crushed — "

"Pardon me, my lady," interrupted Sampson; "but no suspicion of the sort has been excited with respect to your ladyship's husband. Grant me a few minutes, and I will explain myself. I must inform your ladyship, in the strictest

confidence, that Mr. Dysart's arrest took place at Beechey Manor in consequence of an anonymous letter sent early the same morning to Bow Street, and which was instantaneously placed by the magistrate in my hands."

"An anonymous letter!" exclaimed Ernestina, with well-affected surprise and indignation.

"Yes, here it is," said Larry Sampson, as he produced her own note and handed it to her, — that same note which she had despatched by old Underdown to the office at Bow Street, as the reader cannot fail to remember.

She took it with trembling hands and pale countenance; and as she pretended to run her eyes over its contents — those well-known contents — she made a desperate struggle to regain her courage.

"Your ladyship may well be annoyed," observed Sampson, for even the astute and cunning officer was liable to mistake the causes of emotion and excitement now and then. "You are disgusted at the treachery practised by the anonymous correspondent, and you are shocked at observing the handwriting to be that of a lady, and evidently an accomplished one."

"Ah! Dysart has proved false to me, and it is doubtless his mistress who thus betrayed him," cried Ernestina, with all the appearance of the most genuine anguish. "But what has this to do with the disappearance of Sir Archibald Malvern?"

"I will tell your ladyship. This evening Mr. Valentine Malvern called upon me, as he often does, to inquire whether I had made any progress in my researches. I received him in a room where a number of papers lay scattered upon a table. This letter was unguardedly left amongst them; in fact, it lay open. His eye happened to catch a glimpse of it; he seized it, greedily devoured its contents, examined the writing with the utmost attention, and then cried out, 'Yes, 'tis the same, 'tis the same!' To be brief, he explained to me that amongst his father's papers he had some weeks back discovered a note in a beautiful female hand, but without date, address, or signature, and the contents of which, though worded with a caution amounting to ambiguity, indicated a gallant intrigue. The handwriting of that tender epistle and of this anonymous letter are the same, and Mr. Valentine Malvern had instantaneously recognized the fact.

What, then, is the inference which he drew? Why, that the writer of the anonymous letter is most probably known to Mr. Dysart, — perhaps some lady who has a spite against him; and if it could be ascertained who she is, it would, as a matter of course, at the same time establish the identity of the fair and frail correspondent of the lost Sir Archibald Malvern. Not that even this discovery might clear up the mystery of his disappearance; still there is just the possibility that it would do so, and Mr. Valentine is naturally impelled by a restless anxiety to leave no stone unturned in the investigation of his father's fate."

"I understand, Mr. Sampson; it is natural — very natural," said Ernestina, now terribly alarmed lest the officer should take it into his head to go and question her husband upon the subject and show him the anonymous letter, the writing of which he could not fail to recognize as her own. "But wherefore have you come to me?" she asked, in order to glean his views and intentions.

"Mr. Valentine Malvern begged and implored that I would lose no time in seeing your ladyship upon the subject; for he thought that painful as it must be to either your husband or yourself to be intruded upon at such a moment, it would notwithstanding be less improper or indelicate under existing circumstances to appeal to your ladyship than to Mr. Dysart in the matter."

"The handwriting is altogether unknown to me, Mr. Sampson," said Ernestina; "nor am I aware that my unfortunate husband had any reason to fear a lady's rancorous revenge. But if you will leave this note with me, I will break the subject to him to-morrow."

"Ah! if your ladyship would be so kind!" exclaimed Sampson. "I know it must be a painful task for you to undertake, and that it cannot be otherwise than repugnant to your feelings; but when your ladyship reflects that a clue might be formed to the clearing up of a deep mystery — "

"I am quite ready to sacrifice my own feelings in the matter for the sake of a fellow creature," observed Lady Ernestina Dysart; "and as I had some slight acquaintance with Sir Archibald Malvern, and his son is not altogether a stranger to me, it will afford me a melancholy satisfaction, in the midst of my own deep sorrows, to be in any way serviceable in this matter."

"Your ladyship will ensure the lasting gratitude of Mr. Valentine Malvern," said Larry Sampson, rising from his seat. "I will take the liberty of calling to-morrow evening to learn the result of your ladyship's interview with Mr. Dysart, so far as this business is concerned."

The Bow Street officer then took his departure, to the infinite relief of Lady Ernestina, who had passed through an ordeal of harrowing tortures, bewildering sensations, and poignant memories during this interview.

But the moment the door of the apartment closed behind Mr. Lawrence Sampson, she flung the anonymous letter into the fire; and as she beheld it flame up and consume, she murmured to herself, "Thus perish the only evidence that existed of my perfidy toward Dysart."

She then bethought herself of Daniel Coffin the Hangman; and returning into the room where she had left him, she found it unoccupied, and therefore concluded he had taken his departure. Banishing him from her thoughts, she now sat down to her writing-desk and penned the ensuing note:

"Leveson House, Oct. 11, 1814.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart presents her dutiful compliments to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, and humbly requests that his Royal Highness will honour her with a call to-morrow at eleven o'clock punctually. Lady Ernestina is well aware that under ordinary circumstances this demand would savour of the most insolent presumption; but as the circumstances are extraordinary and peculiar, she ventures to hope that his Royal Highness will vouchsafe compliance with her prayer, and that the visit thus besought will be paid with as much privacy as possible."

Having sealed and addressed this billet, Ernestina gave it to a domestic to take at once to Carlton House; and as it was now past ten o'clock and she was wearied with the exciting occurrences of the day, she retired to her own chamber.

But in the meantime, what had really become of Mr. Daniel Coffin?

When left by himself in the dining-room, he suddenly fell into a profound perplexity how to act. The visit of Mr. Lawrence Sampson was, to say the least, alarming; and despite all the reasoning which the Hangman conjured up

to persuade himself that the officer's presence had no reference to him, his evil conscience would not allow this idea to be so easily relied upon. That Sampson might have entered the house upon some pretext, but with the real object of making a reconnoitre, was probable enough; and in this case he had doubtless planted his followers in the street. At all events, Daniel Coffin did not deem it prudent to issue forth at once; while, on the other hand, he could not very well remain in the dining-room, during Ernestina's absence, without exciting the suspicions of any domestic who might chance to enter it.

He knew not exactly what to do; and it was without any fixed intention, but in obedience to one of those vague and undefined impulses which often prompt desperate men that he gently opened the dining-room door and looked out into the hall. The porter had gone down to supper; not a living soul met the Hangman's view by the light of the lamp suspended to the ceiling in the hall.

A thought struck him. He had been told by the domestic, on his arrival, that the Marquis of Leveson was away from home; and Ernestina was therefore mistress of the establishment in her noble uncle's absence. What if he were to hide himself for a few hours, until the next night even, in one of the unoccupied apartments of the spacious dwelling? Were he discovered, Ernestina must be appealed to in order to decide how the intruder was to be disposed of; and she dared not deal harshly with him. On the contrary, he would be safe beneath her protection. But then, as to food? He could very well wait four and twenty hours in a fasting condition when his personal security was concerned; and, at all events, it would be better to incur any risk or privation within the house than stand the chance of encountering Mr. Lawrence Sampson's myrmidons outside the threshold.

Rapid as thought alone can travel did these reflections sweep through the brain of Daniel Coffin as he stood at the dining-room door, looking forth into the hall. There was also something in the adventure that pleased him; and his resolve was soon taken accordingly. Hastily ascending the great marble staircase, he reached the landing on the first story, and opened the nearest door. It led into the Crimson Drawing-room which has been mentioned in preceding chapters. The fire was smouldering in the grate, two wax

candles were burning upon the mantelpiece, and a tray, containing a couple of decanters of wine and a dish of biscuits, stood upon the table. This little refreshment had been served up for Mrs. Owen when she called upon the marquis that afternoon, and the tray had not been removed.

The Hangman was well pleased at the sight thereof; and he speedily poured at least a pint of sherry down his capacious throat. This was so much to his taste that he lost no time in paying his respects with equal devotion to the port; and in a few minutes the decanters were completely drained. He then filled one of his ample pockets with the greater portion of the biscuits; and having thus self-appropriated the provender, he proceeded to examine the room with more attention than at first.

To remain concealed here was hopeless. The domestics, ere they retired for the night, would come to put out the fire and extinguish the candles. Whither should he go? Scarcely had he asked himself this question, when his eyes settled upon a door opposite to the one by which he had entered. He advanced to try it, but found it locked. This was no particularly formidable obstacle to Mr. Daniel Coffin. He felt in his pocket, drew forth a bunch of skeleton keys, and speedily opened the door. Taking one of the wax tapers from the mantel, he passed into the adjoining room; and now, as the reader will no doubt have already understood, the Hangman had entered the first of that mysterious suite of apartments which Venetia Trelawney was led to explore on the evening of her visit to Leveson House.

Having hastily glanced around the room, which we have previously described as small but luxuriously furnished, the Hangman observed that there were wax tapers upon the mantel. He accordingly lighted one of them, and then took back the one which he carried in his hand into the Crimson Drawing-room. This he did to prevent its being missed; and having restored it to its place, he retraced his way into the other apartment, carefully locking himself in by means of the skeleton key that had afforded him ingress.

He now examined this room with admiration and delight, muttering to himself a wish that he was the owner of that little paradise. Having attentively surveyed the sofas ranged around the walls, the vases of flowers, and the various articles of furniture, his eyes were uplifted toward

the silver lamp that was suspended to the ceiling, but which was not burning now. After contemplating it for about a minute, he stood upon a chair to examine it more closely; and thus convincing himself that it was real silver, he muttered, " Old Jeremy would give me a pretty penny for this. Well, I don't think I need go away empty-handed when I do take my departure."

Grimly smiling at this pleasant conceit, and already regarding the silver lamp as his own, Mr. Daniel Coffin descended from the chair, took a taper from the mantel, and passed into the adjoining room. This was smaller but more luxuriously furnished than the one he had just left; and instead of sofas, it contained a number of large and massive armchairs, each provided with a cushion of immense size. But there was no choice collection of fruits, sweets, and wines now upon the table, nor was the lamp with the ground-glass globe now lighted, as was the case when we introduced Venetia Trelawney to this apartment.

Without pausing many minutes, Daniel Coffin proceeded to open the door which faced him; and, still holding the taper in his hand, he entered the gallery of pictures and sculptures. At first he was not inclined to pay much attention to these works of art; but their subjects speedily altered his mood, turning his indifference into eager curiosity, wonder, and sensual delight. We have already in a previous chapter depicted a few of the statuary groups and glanced at one of the pictures; but we must now observe that there were other groups and other pictures the flagrant indecency of which would even have brought a blush to the cheeks of the inmates of a brothel. From the entrance of this gallery to the farther extremity, the works of art became successively more and more indelicate, as if the whole purpose of the arrangement were gradually to lead on the imagination from the first petty shock, through all the phases of enhancing allurement, into the crowning grossness of the most nude and undisguised lasciviousness.

" Well, 'pon my soul, these noblemen are precious rum fellows to have such scenes as these in their houses," thought Daniel Coffin to himself, as with increasing amazement he passed along the gallery. " By goles! it gets worse and worse. If anybody had told me he'd seen such a place in a nobleman's mansion, I shouldn't have believed him.

And now that I recollect, this Marquis of Leveson is always holding forth in the House of Lords about the bad morals of the lower orders and the desecration of the Sabbath. Well, some men are hypocrites — rank impostors, too. What statues, what paintings! The farther I advance the more I seem to learn in the lessons of indecency. I suppose the marquis brings his ladies here sometimes. I wonder whether his niece Ernestina has ever set foot in this gallery. If she has, she can't be much better than she should be; and I dare say she's not, too. In fact, I suppose the prince was enticed to Beechey Manor that night to be captivated by her charms. But Dysart kept his real motive snug enough, whatever it was. Well, 'pon my soul, my head begins to turn, and I feel all nohow looking at these pictures and images. Why, the purest virgin that ever stepped would leave this gallery as corrupt in mind as if she had passed through twenty years of debauchery and profligacy. Nell Gibson, who frequents the dark crib at the Folly Bridges, isn't so bad but that she'd be made worse by a ten minutes' walk up and down this gallery. And everything is so beautifully done, too, the paintings as well as the statues! What a mint of money all this must have cost, and what a lot of sculptors and artists must have been employed to furnish so many different things! Ay, and doesn't the old marquis come at times and gloat over them! What a many women have no doubt lost their virtue in consequence of a visit to this place; and what tales these walls could tell if they only had the gift of speech! But only suppose that a poor devil was to be seen selling cheap pictures and prints half so bad as these great expensive paintings, wouldn't the constables be down upon him in a jiffy, and no mistake! "

While thus musing, Mr. Daniel Coffin brought his inspection of the gallery to a close; and issuing forth, he returned into the room containing the large armchairs.

" Well, I think one of these concerns will be even more comfortable to sleep in for the night than the sofas in the room beyond," he thought to himself as he glanced slowly around. " Besides, I always sleep too heavy when I lay down, and I mustn't stand a chance of being surprised napping."

Having come to this conclusion, the Hangman placed the wax candle upon the table, and then deposited himself in

one of the armchairs. But scarcely had he dropped his person upon the voluptuous-looking cushion when a sharp click, like a clock giving warning, struck his startled ear; and at the same instant his wrists were caught in the manacles and his shoulders were fast griped by the strong steel bands that sprang forth from the woodwork of the treacherous chair.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Hangman, with a desperate struggle to release himself.

But his efforts would not have been more vain or futile had a tremendous boa-constrictor suddenly wound its massive coils around him; the manacles were immovable, the steel bands held his shoulders in an inextricable gripe, and the very chair itself was solidly fastened by the legs to the floor.

Finding that his endeavours were useless, and exhausted by their unavailing strenuousness, the Hangman suddenly desisted from any further struggling with the treacherous chair and its potent mechanism; and as a subdued imprecation fell from his lips, the chill sweat of profound terror burst forth all over him, saturating his very garments and making his shirt cling to him like the cold, clammy grave-clothes of the dead.

CHAPTER XII

ERNESTINA AND THE PRINCE

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the day following the incidents just related, and Ernestina was alone in the Crimson Drawing-room.

She was seated near a harp, and it was evident from her looks and her manner that she was studying a part which she had to play. We do not mean aught in reference to music, although the instrument was there close at hand, but in reference to coquetry and seductive allurement.

Her hair was arranged in massive bands over her alabaster temples, and gathered with a graceful sweep in such a way that it showed the small and well-folded ears. She had selected a dress which displayed her fine form to its most exciting and sensuous advantage, leaving the white plump shoulders bare, and allowing the grand fulness of the bosom to swell in more than half its glowing amplitude above the body of the robe. By a gentle inclination of her figure toward the harp, she was enabled to give her bright and polished neck so swanlike a curve that nothing could exceed the beauty of its arching gracefulness; and, with an admirable prescience of coquettish effect mingled with a seductive languor, she knew that this position would enable the eye of a beholder to trace the symmetry of that sweet neck in its gradual and downward expansion into the noble foundation on which it rested.

The volume and voluptuous form of her bust were in this manner developed to the fullest advantage; and as she leaned toward the harp with all the seeming ease and gracefulness of this really studied attitude, she threw into her looks a melancholy softness which added to the power of her great beauty. Her whole figure was thus sensuously

languid and voluptuously drooping; her eyes were half-veiled by the long lashes beneath which their expression became all the more wanton, and the ripeness and fulness of her shape bespoke a subdued passion as profound and as luxurious as the looks that shone from under the softly drooping lids.

It was a very cold, damp, raw October day, with a leaden sky and a misty atmosphere; but the air of the Crimson Drawing-room was warm and perfumed. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate, and the porcelain vases exhaled a delicious fragrance that stole upon the sense without overpowering it.

But why, just as the timepiece upon the mantel struck eleven, did Lady Ernestina Dysart assume that studied air of mournful pensiveness and sensuous languor as she bent toward the harp? Because a carriage had that moment stopped at the front door, and she was at no loss to conjecture who the visitant was.

In less than a minute a domestic entered, announcing his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. The man immediately retired, closing the door behind him; but Ernestina retained that pensive attitude, as if she were so profoundly absorbed in her reflections that she heard not the entrance of the prince nor the annunciation of his name.

We must here pause for a moment to state that his Royal Highness had called in compliance with Ernestina's note. He was not aware that he had as yet ever seen this lady, but he had heard much of her beauty, and he was not the man to let pass the opportunity of satisfying himself whether report spoke truly in that respect. Besides, he fancied that her ladyship might have something important to communicate from her uncle, the Marquis of Leveson, of whose abrupt departure for the Continent he was already aware. Several reasons therefore induced him, even at some little inconvenience, to comply with the terms of Lady Ernestina Dysart's note; but now that he was ushered into the room where she was seated, he was somewhat surprised to observe the deep absorption and pensiveness of her attitude.

Her back was turned toward him as she sat bending over the harp. He stood still for a few moments, struck by the dazzling whiteness of her neck and shoulders, the elegant shape of her head, and the flowing outlines of her figure.

Still she remained motionless. He advanced a little, and now obtained a glimpse of the bust which glowed in the unveiled luxuriance of its charms against the harp. Upon that grandly developed bosom did the eyes of the royal voluptuary settle; and at the same instant Ernestina, affecting still to remain unconscious of his presence, and with half-averted countenance, began to touch the strings of the instrument.

She was an accomplished musician, and the harp gave forth such sounds that ravished the ears of the prince. The melody stole softly and sensuously upon him, in unison with the voluptuous feelings engendered by the beauteous form on which his eyes rested. The very warmth of the room and fragrance of the atmosphere increased this melting effect, dissolving all his soul into an ineffable tenderness. He stood like one enchanted; his pulses thrilled, the colour deepened upon his countenance, his eyes swam in passion's liquid fire. It seemed as if some unknown paradise on earth were opening to his comprehension at a moment when he had little expected that any such blissful development was in store for him.

And now, gradually did the lady turn her countenance in such a way toward the harp that he caught her profile with that half-vanishing effect which Rembrandt loved so well to depict upon his canvas; and as the light, borrowing a roseate tint from the hue of the crimson curtains which shaded the windows, fell upon that faultless profile, the prince started with a sudden recollection. But the lady still affected to perceive him not, and at the instant that he thus started, she made the splendid instrument give forth such a glorious volume of gushing golden melody that he was again struck motionless and transfixed with ineffable rapture.

But now he studied that profile intently; he marked also the glossy light brown hair, the high and polished brow. He saw the long silken lashes, he observed the dark eye flashing beneath; he traced the outline of the aquiline nose, the well-cut lips of vivid scarlet, and the softly rounded chin. Then again did his looks settle upon the grand exuberance of the bosom that was now heaving visibly, white as snow, but warm and glowing to the eye; and then his looks once again travelled upward to the face which was gradually turning more and more toward him. The seashell pink which

naturally belonged to her complexion was now deepening into the rich carnation hue; the blush gradually descended to her neck, thence suffusing itself over her bosom; and the longer the prince gazed, the more convinced did he become that his lips had glued themselves in impassioned kisses to those glowing cheeks, that his hand had pressed and his head been pillowed upon that heaving, swelling bosom, and that the entire form had lain palpitating with love and desire in his arms.

Slowly now did Ernestina raise her head and turn her eyes toward him, — those large lustrous eyes looking up full into his, and swimming with that Oriental languor which he had observed and which had ravished him before. Ay, and he was no longer uncertain nor in doubt as to where and when those seductive looks had previously shed their Elysian influence upon his soul; and falling on his knees at the lady's feet, he exclaimed, " Heavens! are you my lovely unknown — unknown no longer — but Ernestina Dysart? "

" Oh, then you are not angry with me, beloved prince? " murmured the siren, flinging her snowy arms around his neck.

" Angry with you — impossible! " cried the royal voluptuary, straining her to him even as he knelt, and covering her warm and glowing cheeks with passionate kisses. " But what means this mystery? " he exclaimed, at length, rising and taking a chair by her side. " Are you really Lady Ernestina Dysart, the niece of my friend Leveson? And if so, what meant that scene of mingled outrage, mystery, and love which characterized the night of our first acquaintance?"

" I will tell you everything in good time, my dear prince," answered the lady, as she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses with an appearance of the fondest affection. " But whatever the explanations may be, promise — "

" I can promise anything, everything, to such a charmer as you," interrupted the prince, his head already turning with blissful rapture, as on the night at Beechey Manor. " Ah! how rejoiced I am that we have met again! " and he devoured her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom with his burning kisses. " But tell me what you have to say, and then — and then — talk to me of love, only of love! "

" Listen patiently, if you will, and attentively, if you can, for a few minutes," said Ernestina, with a smile of such

delicious archness and with a look of such wanton meaning that a lava-stream of fierce and fiery passion boiled in the veins of the amorous prince; for her lips revealed rows of pearl and seemed to breathe the ambrosial fragrance of paradise, and her glances went with an electric influence to his very heart's core.

"Let me pillow my head here," he said, reclining it upon her shoulder; "and now proceed. I am all attention."

"In the first place, then," she resumed, "you must know that I am really that same Ernestina whom you have named, and that the Marquis of Leveson is my uncle. Before I married that wretched being, Dysart, and when I was living beneath this roof, my uncle would never allow me to meet your Royal Highness when you called. He took every precaution to prevent me from being seen by you — "

"Ah! the sly dog," murmured the prince; "he knew that to behold you would be to love you. But go on, my dear Ernestina, go on."

"Moreover," she continued, "he would never permit me to attend any balls or parties at which you were likely to be present, and he invariably found some excuse for not introducing me at court. After my marriage, — my unfortunate, unhappy, hated marriage — "

"Ah! you do not love your husband, then?" said the prince.

"I hate, I detest, I abhor him!" cried Ernestina emphatically. "Besides," she immediately added, in a subdued and murmuring tone, "I love you — and you only!"

"Thanks for that assurance, my angel," said the prince, pressing her warmly toward him; and for the time being even the incomparable Venetia Trelawney was forgotten by the royal voluptuary. "But what were you going to observe? — that after your marriage — "

"I was cut out, as it were, from that society in which alone I was likely to meet your Royal Highness."

"Do not Royal Highness me," murmured the prince. "Let me be George or anything else you like to you."

"Dear, dear George," said Ernestina, pressing her lips to his own. "But I will not weary you with a long story. You are aware that Dysart killed Sefton in a duel — "

"And he was condemned to death yesterday," exclaimed the prince. "But what was that paper which I signed — "

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" Here it is — read it, George," interrupted the lady, producing the document from beneath the cushion of a sofa, and displaying it to the view of his Royal Highness.

The prince, suffering his curiosity to distract him for a few moments from his dream of voluptuous bliss, took the paper and read it. But when he found that it was in fact an acknowledgment on his part of a criminal correspondence with Lady Ernestina Dysart, and a solemn undertaking to grant a free pardon to her husband, whatever sentence a criminal tribunal might pass upon him, a feeling of indignation sprang up in his soul, and, turning his eyes reproachfully upon his fair companion, he said, " And you were a party to this precious document? "

" Hear me, prince, hear me, dearest George, and do not prejudge me! " she exclaimed, redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses, and immediately bringing all the wanton witcheries of seductive artifice to play their artillery upon him again.

" But let us first destroy this paper, my love," said the prince; " that is, if you really have any regard and affection for me."

" Destroy it if you will," observed Ernestina, her manner suddenly changing into coldness; " but in that case I shall be ruined, and you will be exposed."

" What mean you? Speak! " cried the prince.

" If the paper be destroyed, Dysart will proclaim to the world all that occurred at Beechey Manor," responded the lady. " Thus my reputation will be wrecked, and yours will sustain no advantage."

" But do you wish me to comply with the guarantee contained in this document? " demanded the bewildered prince. " Do you wish me to exercise my prerogative as regent and grant a free pardon to your husband? I thought you said just now that you hated, loathed, and abhorred him."

" And I repeat those expressions now," exclaimed Ernestina. " Yes, I hate, loathe, and abhor him; and it is precisely because I wish to leave him to his doom that I enjoin you not to destroy that paper, but on the contrary help me in deluding and beguiling the wretched man to the very last. By so doing, he will retain our secret, he will not be goaded by rage or despair to proclaim it to the world, and neither your reputation nor my own need suffer."

"But what purposes have you in view, Ernestina, and how do you propose to carry out your aims?" asked the prince, now beginning to comprehend the wily lady's meaning.

"Listen attentively," she said, throwing her arms about his neck and drawing him toward her in such a manner that his ear came close to her lips; and then she whispered long and earnestly.

"Yes, it can be managed in that way, and it must be done so," said the prince, in a musing tone, when she had ceased speaking. "But have you the nerve, the tact, the courage to carry out the plan to the very last moment?"

"By all the wrongs I have sustained at his hands," returned the lady, in a low voice that was full of concentrated bitterness, "I swear that I am as remorseless in my vengeance as I am capable of being fervid, enthusiastic, and devoted in love."

"I believe you, dearest Ernestina, I believe you," said the prince, now again melting beneath the influence of her blandishments. "And remember, I trust entirely to you, I confide in you altogether."

"My love toward you is the proof of my sincerity," murmured the lady, redoubling the ardour of her caresses and exciting the prince to tender dalliance.

"Well, let me write what you require upon the margin of that document," he said; "and then, as I ere now observed, we can talk of love — and only of love."

Thus speaking, the prince rose and placed himself at a table on which there were writing-materials.

"Now dictate to me, my charming preceptress, what I am to say," he observed, taking up a pen and preparing to write.

"Let the annotation run thus," said Ernestina, bending over him, with one arm thrown about his neck: "'I have reperused this paper and reiterate the promise made therein.' Now prefix the date and your signature. That will do."

"Well, it is done, and I am glad of it," observed the prince. "You do not know how I hate trouble of any kind. I was formed and fashioned to spend my existence pleasurably, and not in the routine of business and serious affairs. Come, put away that document, Ernestina, and tell me once more that you are really and truly very fond of me."

The lady locked up the paper in the drawer of a chiffonier standing in one of the window recesses, and then took her seat upon a sofa, the prince placing himself by her side. At the same instant his looks fell upon the door communicating with the mysterious suite of apartments; and, as a train of recollections associated therewith gushed through his memory, he said, "Ernestina, my darling, have you ever been in those rooms?"

"Never," she replied. "They are my uncle's private apartments, and he does not allow any one save his valet, Stephen Brockman, and the housekeeper to enter them."

"And have you never been inspired with curiosity sufficient to induce you to explore those forbidden regions?" asked the royal voluptuary, now seized with an ardent longing to witness the effect of the gallery's contents upon Ernestina, whose passions he hoped to see flame up to a maddening pitch.

"To speak candidly," she replied, "I have wished to penetrate into the secrets of those apartments; but I have never found an opportunity. The door has always been locked."

"Ah! you little vixen," exclaimed the prince, patting her cheek; "you have tried the door, then?"

"Do you not know that woman's curiosity is as great as her capacity for love?" said Ernestina, laughing. "But have you ever visited those apartments, — you, who are so intimate with my uncle?"

"I have, dearest Ernestina," responded the prince, "and I can assure you that they contain the choicest specimens of statuary and painting. Ah! how I should rejoice to become your guide there!"

"It is impossible," said Ernestina, rising from the sofa and trying the door. "You perceive it is locked, and I dare not ask Brockman for the keys, even if my uncle had left them in his possession," she added, returning to her seat.

"Are you not aware that there is a secret entrance from the dressing-room of the marquis?" inquired the prince. Then, without waiting for an answer, he exclaimed, "But of course you are not, otherwise you would long ago have obtained access to the apartments by that means of communication."

"No doubt," exclaimed Ernestina, laughing, and dis-

playing the rows of pearl which embellished her mouth. "I will not affect a virtue which I do not possess; and now that you have raised my curiosity, you shall indeed become my guide and companion in a visit to those rooms. But wait an instant, while I assure myself that the coast is clear."

Thus speaking, the lady again started from her seat by the prince's side, and went to look forth upon the landing. No one was there, and she beckoned his Royal Highness to follow hastily. He at once obeyed, and they passed together into her uncle's bedchamber. This they traversed and entered the dressing-room; but Ernestina saw no trace of a door in the wall which separated that dressing-room from the private suite of apartments.

"You are more puzzled than if you were wildered in the maze at Hampton Court," cried the prince, laughing; then, having pressed his lips upon her fair shoulder as he threw his arm for a moment around her waist, he said, "Look here."

Thus speaking, he pressed his thumb upon a particular spot on the paper, and a door immediately flew open. Bounding past the prince, Ernestina sped into the room thus revealed to her; but a cry of mingled amazement and alarm burst from her lips as her eyes encountered the never-to-be-forgotten face of Daniel Coffin the Hangman.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PRISONER IN THE CHAIR

At that ejaculation of terror the prince sprang forward from the dressing-room just in time to catch Lady Ernestina Dysart in his arms as she was recoiling from the hideous spectacle of that man whom she never saw nor thought of without associating him with the ghastly horrors of death and the grave; for the incidents of the night at the Blackheath villa were impressed on her brain as indelibly as if seared there with a red-hot iron.

"Who the devil is this fellow?" exclaimed the prince, the moment his looks lighted upon the Hangman; but the next instant he burst out into such an uncontrollable fit of laughter that all Ernestina's terror vanished, and she glanced again toward the object of her aversion in order to discover the cause of her royal companion's sudden jocularity.

And now she saw what she had not at first perceived, namely, the ignominious as well as ludicrous manner in which Daniel Coffin was held captive in the chair; and a smile wavered upon her beauteous lips, despite the abhorrence and loathing which she entertained for that man. The whole truth flashed to her comprehension in a moment, for she was not so innocent nor so inexperienced as to remain long in doubt as to the real uses which that treacherous chair was intended to serve; and it likewise struck her that the Hangman, instead of leaving the house on the preceding evening, had stolen up into this suite of apartments and had fallen into a trap which her precious uncle was wont to set for a fairer and lovelier prey than that which it had now caught.

On his side, the Hangman had instantaneously recognized the prince regent, whose person was no stranger to him;

and, momentarily aghast with dismay, the wretch sat glaring wildly on his Royal Highness. But speedily recovering his wonted presence of mind, especially when he saw that the prince treated the affair as such a capital joke, he growled forth, "Well, can't you release a poor devil? I have been fast here ever since ten o'clock last night."

"Oh, the fellow will kill me, positively kill me with laughing," cried the prince, actually writhing with paroxysms of mirth as he leaned against the wall for support, while the tears streamed down his cheeks now purple from the same cause. "Oh, this is too good, too rich! Ernestina, why don't you enjoy it as I do?"

"Enjoy it, by goles!" growled the Hangman, savagely. "I don't think your Royal Highness would enjoy it very much either. It's no joke to pass a night locked up in an infernal chair that is worse than the stocks, barring the pelting of the rotten eggs."

"Well, I never laughed so much in all my life," exclaimed the prince, the humorous fit now gradually subsiding. Then, as he closed the door opening from the dressing-room, he said, "Ernestina, do you know our captive friend here? I can't congratulate him upon the pleasantness of his aspect, and if men's countenances were to be taken as bail, I am very sure his would never be accepted."

"No, I am quite ignorant who he is," said Lady Dysart, making Coffin a rapid sign not to contradict the assertion thus boldly ventured. "But I dare say he has found his way into the house on some love-adventure with one of the female servants," she added, thus furnishing him with a ready excuse to account for his presence there.

"Egad, ma'am, you're quite right," exclaimed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "It was just as you say, and the girl deluded me into this place, where she very politely asked me to be seated, and lo and behold! I was lumbered and limboed in a jiffy. But I'll be even with her yet, the hussy! Only, I hope you won't make no noise about it."

"Rest assured on that head," Ernestina hastened to reply. "But on your part, you will never betray what you have experienced or seen within these walls?"

"I don't want to be laughed at for a fool, ma'am," responded Coffin; "and therefore I shall keep a still tongue in my head. But pray release me."

"In a moment, all in good time," exclaimed the prince, still with a smile upon his countenance as he surveyed the man who cut such a piteous figure, with his looks made haggard by a night of restlessness, and whose aspect was not improved by his matted hair and unshaven chin. "Now, is it really possible," continued his Royal Highness, "that any girl in the service of Lord Leveson took a fancy to so singular a gentleman as you are?"

"She pretended to, at all events," replied Coffin; "but don't you see, it was only to amuse herself by enticing me into this trap."

"And right well must she have been amused, too," rejoined the prince, still with a bantering tone. "But do you know, my good fellow, that if any one asked me seriously and solemnly to guess who you are, I could not possibly fall back upon any other hypothesis than that you are Jack Ketch."

"And by Satan!" exclaimed Coffin, with another grim smile, "your Royal Highness wouldn't be far short of the mark, and that's plain enough!"

"Heavens! don't talk so horribly," cried Ernestina, becoming very pale.

"Well, ma'am," continued Coffin, "the prince wants to know who I am, and as I am very certain he won't betray me, I tell him candidly and openly that I am — or at least was — Jack Ketch, until that cursed affair down at Mrs. Owen's —"

"Ah! is this possible?" ejaculated the prince, who at first thought the fellow was joking when he acknowledged himself to be the public executioner; and the countenance of his Royal Highness now became suddenly stern and severe.

"Let us liberate him and send him about his business," said Ernestina, catching the prince by the arm and gazing on him with a look of entreaty.

"Yes, and the sooner he gets out of my sight, the better," exclaimed George. "But, no!" he suddenly ejaculated, as a thought flashed to his mind. "This fellow may be of service to us," he added, in a musing tone. Then, drawing Ernestina to the farther end of the room, he said, in a low whisper, "With this scoundrel's coöperation, our plans relative to Dysart would be made secure and safe enough."

"I can at once fathom your meaning," responded the lady, likewise lowering her voice to a scarcely audible whisper; "but would you trust him?"

"And why not?" asked the prince. "He would not dare betray us, because he must know full well that not a human being would believe him, and that he would be treated as a bedlamite. Besides, gold purchases the secrecy even of such ruffians as this."

"True! But he is no longer the agent of the law; he has ceased to occupy his loathsome office," observed the lady. "For, if I be not mistaken, he is the wretch who shot Mrs. Owen's footman, and therefore he himself has become amenable to the law."

"Ah, I did not think of that at the moment," said the prince. "But, at all events, let us question the villain and ascertain what his position and prospects really are. One never knows what loopholes such scoundrels have to creep out of. In any case, there is no harm in questioning him; it will only be at the expense of remaining a few minutes longer in his precious company."

With this resolve the prince turned again toward the Hangman, who had waited in some degree of suspense the result of the whispered colloquy between his Royal Highness and Ernestina. As for the lady herself, it was with evident reluctance that she again accosted the Hangman; nor did she much admire the prospect of falling even more deeply into that ruffian's power than she already was.

"Now tell me," said the prince, leaning against the secret door of the dressing-room, and fixing his eyes searchingly upon the Hangman, "what prospect you have of ever getting out of the scrape into which your crimes have plunged you?"

"First tell me," exclaimed Coffin, "what motive you have in asking?"

"No unfriendly one," replied the prince. "You are well aware that it does not suit my purpose to hand you over to the grasp of justice: that calculation you have already revolved in your mind, and therefore you need no assurance from my lips upon the point. But I have a particular reason for wishing to know whether you entertain any hopes of being shortly restored to the very pleasant and

agreeable office which you are compelled, it appears, temporarily to vacate."

"Does your Royal Highness mean the post of Jack Ketch?" inquired Coffin, more and more amazed at the turn the conversation was taking.

"To be sure I do!" exclaimed the prince. "Come, speak out, man; you know I can't — or, rather, won't — do you any harm, whereas," he added, more deliberately, "I may do you some good."

"Ah! that's different," said Coffin, his looks now brightening up. "Well, my lord, — or Royal Highness, — I'll explain to you exactly the predicament I stand in. You see I'm now playing at hide-and-seek, — afraid to go near my own house — "

"And therefore you take up your quarters in other people's," added the prince, drily. "But go on. I suppose you are afraid of being arrested?"

"Just so," observed the Hangman; "and there is but two chances of my ever being comfortable again. One is the death of my sworn enemy, Larry Sampson — "

"That is the famous Bow Street officer, eh?" said the prince.

"Lor', how your Royal Highness does know everything!" exclaimed Coffin. "One would really think you'd been a gonnoff or cracksman yourself in your day, and perhaps you would, too, if you hadn't been born a prince."

"Well, go on," said his Royal Highness, who could not help smiling at the conceit. "You have told me one of your chances of getting what you call comfortable again; now tell me the other."

"It is just this," rejoined Daniel Coffin, "that if so be there's a man to hang some fine Monday morning, and no one to hang him, the sheriff will make proclamation of free pardon to any enterprising individual, no matter what his crimes may have been, who shall step for'ard and offer himself for the dooty."

"Ah!" ejaculated the prince, with a rapid glance of intelligence at Ernestina. "Then you really do expect that, sooner or later, you may resume your favourite post?"

"If it wasn't an unpleasant subject, prince," said the hangman, looking toward the lady in a meaning manner,

" I might perhaps let you into the real secret of my hopes on the point we are discussing."

" Do not mind me," observed Ernestina. " Speak candidly and openly to his Royal Highness, whatever you may have to say; " and she walked toward the end of the room, still, however, remaining within ear-shot, as the chamber has already been described as of narrow dimensions.

" Well, then, since I am to speak out, I will," continued Daniel Coffin, fully convinced, in his own mind, that all this questioning did not arise from mere curiosity alone on the part of the prince, but was connected with the topic of his recently whispered colloquy with Ernestina, whatever that topic might have been. " The fact is, your Royal Highness, Mr. Dysart will have to figure at Tuckup Fair next Monday week, if so be your Royal Highness doesn't mean to let him off. And, somehow or another, a little bird whispers in my ears that you won't let him off — "

" Ah! " cried the prince, and the ejaculation was echoed, but in a lower tone, by Lady Ernestina Dysart. " What makes you assume that, fellow? " he demanded, sternly.

" Oh, simply because I see your Royal Highness and her ladyship on such very comfortable terms together," replied the Hangman. " Coming into this pleasant range of apartments, for instance, very likely to take a peep into yonder gallery, and, at all events, whispering together, exchanging sly glances, and seeming on such capital terms, that a husband is better out of the way in such a case."

As Coffin thus spoke, Ernestina turned aside her countenance, that was crimsoning with mingled indignation and shame; but it did not strike her that it was her own fault if the ruffian thus were enabled to allude with coarse flippancy to her amour with the prince. As for her royal paramour himself, he was, for a moment, inclined to give way to his anger at the fellow's remarks; but, perceiving that any display of wrath would be alike useless and ridiculous, he bit his lip and held his peace.

" So, you observe," continued the Hangman, " that I'm rather a far-seeing covey, after my own fashion; and to return to what I was saying, I'm now in hope that, if so be Mr. Dysart should be tucked up next Monday week, I may have the opportunity of getting a free pardon, and going home all comfortable again to my crib in Fleet Lane, where

I shall be happy to shave your Royal Highness any day for nothing."

"And such is your hope," said the prince, in a musing tone; "and you expect it will be gratified on Monday week. Now, can you keep a secret? And do you want to earn a couple of hundred guineas?"

"Yes, to both questions," replied the Hangman, joyfully.

"Ernestina," said the prince, "retire into that room, and close the door. I would rather speak to this man alone. It must only be painful to your feelings," he added, in a whisper, as he conducted the lady into the luxuriously furnished apartment, which has already been described as forming the first of the suite.

Ernestina accordingly remained in this room while the prince concluded his discourse with Daniel Coffin. What further passed between them we need not now relate; suffice it to say that, having been closeted alone with the Hangman for upwards of ten minutes, his Royal Highness returned to the lady in the apartment to which he had conducted her.

"Well, my angel, it is all right," he said, in a low, mysterious tone, as he closed the door behind him. "The fellow has entered into my views, and I am glad that the thought struck me."

"But where is he? Have you released him from the chair? Is he gone?" demanded Ernestina, trembling with the excitement into which the prolonged train of incidents had thrown her.

"The rascal could not very well leave the house in broad daylight," said the prince, "to be stopped by your servants as a prowling robber, or to be snapped up by some constable or informer in the streets. No, he must remain here until dusk. I have liberated him from the chair, and he is busy devouring a quantity of biscuits, with which his pocket is crammed. But you look pale, ill —"

"I shall be better presently, my dearest George," answered Ernestina, with a fond look. "But let us leave these apartments, and return to the drawing-room. We have already been too long away, and if any of the servants should have entered during our absence, what must they have thought?"

"That I know how to appreciate the beauties of an

angel," replied the prince, caressing her. "We will return to the drawing-room, since you desire it; but we must retrace our way through your uncle's chambers."

"By what means did that dreadful man obtain access to these rooms, I wonder?" said Ernestina, the thought now striking her for the first time.

"By aid of a skeleton key, he tells me," answered the prince; "and I have doubt his intention was to rob the house. But we will not trouble ourselves any more about him; he will be useful to us, and that is sufficient. Come, let us retrace our way to the drawing-room."

The prince accordingly led Ernestina back into the adjoining apartment, where the Hangman was now walking to and fro to stretch his limbs, which were horribly cramped by his long prisonage in the treacherous chair. Opening the secret door, by pressing his hand on one of the roses that formed the pattern of the paper, his Royal Highness and Ernestina once more gained the dressing-room. The secret door was carefully closed again; and from the dressing-room they passed into the bedchamber.

But, to tell the truth, they paused there awhile; and nearly another half-hour elapsed ere they returned into the Crimson Drawing-room. Then the lady's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes swam in a softly sensuous languor, while the countenance of the prince was radiant with satisfaction and triumph. Alas! Venetia was still forgotten by the royal voluptuary.

"Farewell for the present, my charmer," he said, straining Ernestina to his breast. "We shall soon meet again, — the sooner the better."

"That depends entirely on yourself, my dear George," whispered the lady, in her soft musical tones, and with a look that was in itself a whole world of blandishments.

The prince now took his departure, and Ernestina, having ordered the carriage, ascended to her own chamber to dress for going out.

CHAPTER XIV

NEWGATE

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon as a beautiful girl, seventeen years of age, and neatly though plainly dressed, reached the visitors' gate at Newgate. Her countenance was pale as marble, her eyes were somewhat red with weeping, and the nervous quivering of her lips showed how strong and painful were the efforts which she made to crush and stifle the grief that was swelling so agonizingly in her bosom. Her slight form was modelled to the most graceful symmetry; innocence shed its soft halo even upon her profoundly mournful looks; her retiring, timid, and bashful manner unmistakably denoted the purity of her mind.

Ascending the steps leading to the gate, or half-door, surmounted with its bristling fringe of iron spikes, her looks plunged affrightedly and recoilingly into the dark gloomy vestibule within; and the next moment a turnkey looked over the well-guarded barrier.

"What is it, young 'oman?" he said, in a short, surly tone, for he was discussing his dinner and a pot of porter at the moment of her arrival.

"I believe — I am afraid," she answered, tremulously and timidly, "that a young gentleman named Theodore Varian has been brought hither this forenoon."

"We've no young genelmen here, miss," said the turnkey, gruffly. "A young man has been brought in this mornin', committed by the lord mayor for trial."

"May I see him?" asked the girl, the syllables which formed the request seeming as if they issued from a breaking heart. "He is my brother," and she burst into tears.

"Well, I'm sorry to be obleeged to refuse you, my dear,"

said the turnkey, somewhat softened; "but it's after the hours for wisitors, and it's agin the rules to let anybody enter now. I'm wery sorry, I say, but you must come to-morrow mornin' at eleven o'clock."

"Oh, can you not let me see my poor brother, if only for a moment?" asked Ariadne Varian, in a voice that was convulsed with bitter, bitter anguish.

"It can't be done, miss," said the turnkey; "but you can ax the guv'ner. Go on a little farther, and ascend them steps which leads to the door of his house."

Then, having waved a huge key in the direction to which he had alluded, the man disappeared from the gate, and poor Ariadne, hastily wiping her eyes, passed along the front of the frowning prison until she reached the door of the governor's dwelling. The knock which she gave was low and timid, for there was in her soul a sense of such deep, deep humiliation that it seemed to her as if her prayer would only be granted by a display of object servility on her part, and that even too loud a knock would ensure a refusal. Alas! this poor young girl was already doomed, at so tender an age, to experience the degradation which even innocence feels when visiting the abode of the criminal.

A woman servant answered the door, and the instant Ariadne began to make known her business, the governor himself issued forth from an office close by.

"I'm sorry I can't help you, young woman," he said; "but it is altogether against the rules to admit a visitor after the proper hours. It is more than I dare do. You must come to-morrow morning. But what case is it?"

"I am the sister of Theodore Varian, sir," replied Ariadne, again bursting into tears, and leaning against the entrance for support.

"Ah! I recollect," cried the governor. "Committed just now from the Mansion House, eh? Embezzlement and fraud — my friend Emmerson the prosecutor. Ah! young woman, it is a bad case; your brother should have known better. There, now, don't cry like this; people will think I am ill-using you, perhaps. Come to-morrow at eleven."

With these words the governor closed the door of his house, and Ariadne turned slowly away from the prison, weeping as if her heart would break.

A few minutes afterward a carriage dashed up to the governor's dwelling, and a livery servant, leaping down from behind, gave a long, thundering knock which raised every echo in the Old Bailey. The front door was thrown open, the governor himself rushed down the steps, and, assisting Lady Ernestina Dysart to alight, he conducted her with the profoundest manifestations of respect into his own drawing-room.

"I wish to see my unhappy husband," said the lady, assuming an air of intense affliction.

"Well, your ladyship, it is a leetle after the usual hours," observed the governor, with his blandest tone and utmost suavity of manner; "but of course I could not for a moment think of enforcing the gaol regulations in respect to your ladyship. Will your ladyship see Mr. Dysart in this apartment?"

"No, sir, I thank you," responded Ernestina. "It is in the gloom and dreariness of his own cell that he requires consolation, and thither I shall trouble you to conduct me. But I may as well inform you," she added, with a mysterious look, "that I cherish every hope of obtaining a reprieve and a pardon for my unfortunate husband."

"I am delighted to hear it, my lady," exclaimed the governor. "It is indeed an affair demanding the exercise of the royal prerogative of mercy," added this gentleman who a few minutes before had pronounced Varian's case to be so very black. "Is there anything I can do to cheer Mr. Dysart's spirits, — anything your ladyship can suggest?"

"I thank you most sincerely," answered Ernestina, with a smile so gracious and condescending that it quite ravished the governor, who was one of those persons that consider the favour of aristocracy to be an inestimable benefit and would sooner lose their ears or their eyes than incur the displeasure of this said aristocracy. "Yes, I think you can do something to cheer poor Dysart," continued the lady; "and I shall not forget to mention your kindness in terms of gratitude to my uncle the Marquis of Leveson."

"What can I do to oblige your ladyship?" asked the governor, now lifted up to the seventh heaven of delight.

"You may cheer my poor husband's spirits from time to time by assuring him that he is certain of a reprieve

and eventual pardon," continued Lady Ernestina Dysart. "He will be more tranquillized and more confident by receiving such assurances from your lips, because he may fancy that when coming from me they are rather the expression of what I hope and desire than what I am certain of. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, my lady," replied the obsequious governor. "I will seek every opportunity to visit Mr. Dysart for a few moments, and will hint my conviction that he has nothing to apprehend, but everything to hope."

"You may do this with the greatest confidence, I can assure you," said Ernestina, inwardly rejoicing at the ease with which the man's sycophancy made him her tool in the matter. Then, apparently in quite a casual way, she observed, "I can only say, my dear sir, that Lord Leveson will always be most happy to see you in Albemarle Street, and that henceforth no guest will be received at his table with a more cordial welcome than yourself."

The governor was now so enchanted that he knew not whether he was standing upon his head or his heels; and he literally confounded himself in bowings and scrapings. Ernestina rose from the chair which she had taken on entering the room, and the obsequious governor forthwith conducted her to the cell in which her husband was confined. He then withdrew, and Ernestina remained alone in the company of Paul Dysart.

"What intelligence have you for me?" he demanded, with breathless impatience.

"Good," she replied; then taking from about her person a document which her husband instantaneously recognized, the pointed to some writing on the margin, saying, "Read this."

Dysart's looks at once settled with all the avidity of suspense upon the writing thus indicated; and when he beheld that solemn recognition of the pledge contained in the document, with the prince's signature affixed thereto, he exclaimed, in a joyous tone, "Thank Heaven! I am saved!"

"Yes, you have now nothing to dread, Paul," said Ernestina, appearing to participate in his enthusiastic delight. "The prince was with me for an hour this morning, and he did not hesitate to pen of his own accord that anno-

tation on the margin of the paper. But he nevertheless feels that the matter is a delicate one, and must be managed with tact and judgment, so as to prevent the public mind from being outraged by a leniency which is not warranted by the circumstances. These are the prince's own words; and he has accordingly hit upon a plan — "

" And that plan? " exclaimed Dysart, impatiently.

" I will explain it to you," said Ernestina, with a winning air of apparent sincerity, all the more deeply simulated in proportion to the ticklish nature of the ground upon which she was touching. " The prince's idea is that things must be left to take their usual course until the very last moment — "

" Ah! I understand you," interrupted Dysart, becoming ghastly pale. " He means to treat me like one of those common malefactors who are made to ascend even the very platform of the scaffold before the reprieve is produced."

" Do not be impatient, and do not give way to passionate feelings," said Ernestina, as she again secured the document about her person. " The prince has desired me to submit two alternatives to your consideration. The first is that you receive a respite at once, and this to be followed by a commutation of the sentence to three years' imprisonment in Newgate; the other is that you receive the respite on the scaffold, and this to be followed by a free pardon within a day or two. In either case appearances will be saved, and the public will have no room to suspect that any private influences or intrigues of an extraordinary nature have been brought to bear upon the mind of the prince regent."

" Yes, I see the difficulty in which he is placed," said Dysart, " and I was not altogether unprepared for something of this sort. Well, the alternatives do not require a moment's reflection: I accept the latter, as being the shortest though the most painful ordeal. As for remaining cooped up in this infernal prison for three years, I'd sooner be hanged straight off at once. And, after all, there's no great harm in mounting the steps of a gibbet, when one knows that the sheriff has got the reprieve in his pocket."

" This is the course I should have recommended, had you asked my advice," said Ernestina; " because in ten days all will be over, and you will be free again."

" And then we will return to the Continent, or go any-

where you like," observed Dysart, anxious to show a conciliatory spirit toward his wife, for he more than suspected that the prince had exacted from her certain favours as the reward of the acknowledgment written on the margin of the document. " What do you say, Ernestina? "

" Oh, by all means let us repair to France, at least for a time," she exclaimed, appearing to catch with avidity at the proposal. " You have plenty of ready money in your possession, and I shall manage to get a thousand or two from my uncle."

" So much the better. By the bye, what did the prince say when he found that the heroine of his midnight adventure and Lady Ernestina Dysart were one and the same person? "

" If I told you that he was very sorry to meet me again, I should deceive you, Paul," she responded, with an arch look. " Personally, I hate and detest him, but I was prepared to make any sacrifice for your sake. However, do not let us talk upon that subject. You must now keep up your spirits as well as you can."

" Oh, I shall be happy enough, my dear," exclaimed her husband. " Are you to see the prince again shortly? "

" Yes, in a day or two," she replied. " He made me promise — "

" That's right! " observed Dysart. " Stick close to him. Not that he can possibly fly from his word — "

" He would not have ratified the document if such had been his intention," Ernestina hastened to answer. " But I can tell you something more, Paul — "

" What is it? " he demanded, eagerly.

" The prince has promised that a private intimation shall be sent to the governor to the effect that the extreme sentence of the law is not to be carried out in your case; and his object in doing this is that the governor himself may give you a secret assurance of your eventual safety."

" Ah! now the last remaining scintillation of uneasiness has become extinguished in my mind," exclaimed Dysart, rubbing his hands joyously. " Upon my word, my dear Ernestina, you have managed all this admirably, and my future conduct shall show my gratitude toward you."

The lady embraced her husband, and then took her departure. Returning to the governor's room, she again thanked this functionary for his courtesy and kindness,

and entering the carriage, drove home to Albemarle Street, rejoicing at the success of her interview with Dysart and the security of mind into which she had so completely but so artfully lulled him.

In the course of the afternoon the governor visited the prisoner's cell; and having inquired with all possible respect and courtesy after his health, he said, "I think, Mr. Dysart, that I shall not exceed the bounds of duty by dropping a hint that may serve to tranquillize your mind."

"You are very good, my dear sir," exclaimed the prisoner. "And this hint — "

"Is to the effect that you need not apprehend a very severe carrying out of the law," responded the governor, with a knowing look. "The fact is, sir, I am a little in the confidence of certain persons high in authority — "

"Ah! I understand," said Dysart, seeing in this mysterious hint on the governor's part the realization of the announcement made to him by his wife. "It has been whispered to you that a reprieve and pardon may be confidently relied upon."

"Hush!" observed the governor, placing his finger to his lip in a meaning manner.

"Say no more," exclaimed Dysart, joyfully. "I understand you, sir."

"But not a word to the turnkeys, not a word even to your friends," said the governor; "for this is of the nature of a state secret, Mr. Dysart, and if I have ventured to drop a hint, it is because I do not like to see you linger in suspense."

Thus speaking, the governor withdrew, and Mr. Paul Dysart sat down to his dinner as pleasantly and as comfortably as if his pardon had already been proclaimed to the world.

Meantime Lady Ernestina had returned home to Albemarle Street, and she also enjoyed her dinner that day with as much zest as her husband experienced in Newgate. At about nine o'clock in the evening, Mr. Lawrence Sampson was announced, and the lady received him with her wonted affability.

"Sit down, Mr. Sampson," she said, with a gracious stoop from the pedestal of her aristocratic hauteur, "and take a glass of wine. I have seen my poor husband to-day, and broke to his ears the matter which you mentioned to me

last evening. I assured him that if he had really indulged in any love-affair or amorous intrigue unknown to me, I would freely and cordially forgive him; and I besought him to tell me the truth for the sake of Mr. Malvern, who was inconsolable on account of his father's still unexplained and unaccountable disappearance. But Mr. Dysart assured me that he had no reason to suspect any female of treachery toward him. I then showed him the anonymous letter which had given the information leading to his arrest, but he did not recognize the handwriting. His manner corroborated his words. I have therefore done all I could for you in the affair, Mr. Sampson, and in one sense I am sorry that the result is not more favourable to Mr. Malvern's hopes of discovering a clue to his father's fate; while, on the other hand, I rejoice that my husband has proved guiltless of any unworthy treatment calculated to evoke a female's vengeance."

"I thank your ladyship for the trouble you have taken in the matter," said the officer. "Would you have the kindness to give me back the anonymous letter? It may serve on some future occasion — "

"I have locked it up in my writing-desk, Mr. Sampson," observed the lady, with the most perfect self-possession, although, as the reader will recollect, she had consigned the document to the flames; "but the desk is up-stairs in the drawing-room, and I will fetch you the note," she added, rising from her seat.

"I could not think of giving your ladyship so much trouble," exclaimed Sampson. "Perhaps you will have the goodness to remit the letter to me by post at your ladyship's convenience?"

"Most assuredly, Mr. Sampson," said Ernestina. Then, so soon as Larry had taken his leave, she murmured to herself, "Ah! even the cunning Bow Street officer is made a dupe by me!"

Lounging in an armchair drawn near the fire in the dining-room, Ernestina sat meditating upon her various schemes and plots until past eleven o'clock; then, so soon as the domestics had retired for the night, she proceeded to assist Mr. Daniel Coffin in taking his departure from the mansion. Entering her uncle's dressing-room, she opened the door by means of the secret spring, and the Hangman

instantaneously came forth from the apartment which was furnished with the luxurious sofas, he having experienced no inclination to entrust himself again to either of the armchairs in the central room of the suite.

Guided by Ernestina, Coffin descended the stairs on tiptoe, and when they reached the hall, he said, in a low tone and with a cunning leer, "Ah! my lady, your friend the prince is a precious rum customer. He's down to a dodge or two, he is!"

"But he pays well those who serve him," replied Ernestina, with a look of deep meaning, "and he is remorseless in his vengeance against those who deceive him."

"I shall be one of them that he pays well, ma'am," answered Coffin.

He then stole out of the house, and Ernestina, infinitely relieved by the departure of a man whose looks always produced upon her the impression of a hideous reptile's gaze, tripped up-stairs to her own chamber.

But as she passed the door of her uncle's room, she was seized with a sudden inclination to return into the mysterious suit of apartments and explore them fully. The deep silence that prevailed through the mansion struck, however, ominously to her soul; and, continuing her way to her own room, she decided upon postponing the gratification of her curiosity until another occasion.

CHAPTER XV

A CHAPTER TO WHICH WE CAN GIVE NO TITLE

It was nine o'clock on the Monday evening which Venetia had named for her appointment with the prince regent; and his Royal Highness sat alone in a small but sumptuously furnished room at Carlton House. A side door communicated with a bedchamber, which was fitted up with even a surpassing luxury; but that door was closed for the present.

The prince reclined upon a sofa in the first-mentioned apartment, and he was giving free rein to all the voluptuous thoughts which the image of Venetia could not fail to conjure up in his easily excitable imagination. Within reach of his hand stood a table spread with wines of many exquisite descriptions and a choice dessert; a cheerful fire blazed in the grate; the heavy hangings were drawn over the windows, and the atmosphere was warm and perfumed. A lustre suspended to the ceiling diffused a rich and mellow light through the room, and the general aspect of luxurious comfort was enhanced by the velvet drapery which covered the doors, as if not even the faintest thrill of a wintry air should be allowed to penetrate thither.

We said that the prince was yielding himself up to the pleasures of imagination, as a meet and provocative prelude to the more real joys that were to come. For he had no doubt as to Venetia's keeping her appointment, inasmuch as she had written him a note in the morning reiterating in her own beautiful calligraphy the hurried promise she had made on the evening of the banquet at Colonel Malpas's house.

As he thus reclined upon the sofa, confident in the sincerity of his expected charmer, the prince insensibly found

himself entering into a comparison between her beauty and that of every other lovely female who had submitted to his embraces. Their number was legion, it was true, but still in a rapid survey did he glance at them all, not forgetting Octavia Clarendon, Mrs. Fitzherbert, Lady Letitia Lade, Mrs. Brace, the milliner, the Countess of Jersey, and the Duchess of Devonshire; and he came at length to the conclusion that none was to be compared with Venetia. Nor in this mental review of his almost countless conquests amongst beauties of all grades and ranks, from the duchess to the milliner, from the countess to the ballet-dancer, and from the haughtiest dame to the humblest servant-girl, — nor in this category, we say, did he forget to include Miss Bathurst, Agatha Owen, and Lady Ernestina Dysart. He remembered that the first-named had once been eminently beautiful; his mind still retained pleasurable impressions of his amour with Agatha; but chiefly did his fancy gloat over the superb and voluptuous charms of the impassioned Ernestina. Between this lady, then, and Venetia did he hover in a few moments' uncertainty, his memory comparing their respective charms, — the eyes, hair, complexion, and bust of Ernestina, with the eyes, hair, complexion, and bust of Venetia; but at length, as above stated, he gave his decision in favour of the latter, Yes, for about Venetia there was all the first freshness of youth, the bloom upon the peach that has scarcely come in contact with the rude hand of man.

And now, as the image of the beauteous creature had become paramount in his mind, to the exclusion of all the rest, he felt his impatience for her arrival augmenting every instant. He looked at his watch; it was ten minutes past nine — was she not coming? Yes; for scarcely had he asked himself the question when the door opened from the landing without, the velvet drapery was pushed aside, and Venetia was ushered into his presence. The curtain fell again, the domestic who had escorted her thither closed the door behind her, and the prince regent sprang forward to clasp her in his arms.

Venetia had made her appearance closely veiled and enveloped in an ample cloak, so as to avoid being recognized by the prince's servants; but she now hastily threw off her bonnet and veil, dropped her cloak, and fell in all the

grandeur of her beauty into the outstretched arms of her royal lover.

"Oh, how magnificent you look!" murmured the enraptured prince, as he conducted her to a seat after fondly and fervidly embracing her; then, placing himself by her side, he contemplated her with the earnest looks of a devouring sensuousness.

As the light shone upon the beauteous creature, enhancing the brilliancy of her charms into positive radiance, she seemed a being of celestial mould and nature. Her very presence was dazzling and overpowering; for every feature and contour appeared to possess its own light, — the lustre of the eyes, the alabaster of the forehead, the vivid redness of the lips, the snowy whiteness of the neck and bosom, and the auburn glory of the hair.

She was dressed in a crimson velvet robe, with a low bodice fitting tight to her shape, and her arms were naked. The gentle agitation which she experienced had deepened the rich bloom upon her cheeks, and altogether she looked so transcendently lovely that the prince felt as if he could surrender not only his present rank but also the hope of some day wearing the British crown, rather than resign the certainty of possessing her this night.

"Dearest — ever dear Venetia," he said, passing one arm around her neck, and drawing her gently toward him, "is it indeed possible that the happy moment has arrived for me to enjoy your love? — or am I plunged in a delicious dream which is to know the waking of disappointment?"

"Faithful to my promise, I am here," murmured Venetia, in the melting tones of her sweet, limpid voice. "Do you remember all the conditions of our compact?"

"You shall recapitulate them, my angel," replied the prince; "and there is nothing you can demand to which I shall hesitate to assent."

"First and foremost," said Venetia, "it was agreed that I should marry in order to save my reputation, and I have done so."

"Ah! happy Horace Sackville!" exclaimed the prince. "But tell me, dearest, was he already engaged to you on that day when we agreed that you should marry?"

"Assuredly not," answered Venetia. "But I was aware that he formed one of the party of six who had leagued, or,

rather, wagered in the love-campaign; I likewise knew that he had seen me often and was inspired with an affection for me, and I consequently felt certain that he would accept my hand in marriage."

"But does he know — is he aware — "

"That I am come hither this evening? Yes; before we were married I explained to him that she whom he took as his wife was pledged to become the mistress of the prince."

"Truly he must be infatuated with you, my Venetia! But this is not wonderful; thou art the loveliest woman that ever trod upon the earth."

"O flatterer!" cried Venetia, with playful remonstrance. "But I have before told you how readily and fluently these compliments glide from your tongue."

"By Heaven! they are truths when applied to thee," exclaimed the prince, first devouring her with his regards and then covering her face, shoulders, and bosom with frenetic kisses. "But you were recapitulating the terms of our compact? Go on, and let us finish all details savouring of business, that we may devote ourselves wholly and solely to the enjoyments of love."

"It was agreed," continued Venetia, "that you were to find some office for my husband about your royal person, so that we might have a suite of apartments allotted to us at Carlton House."

"To-morrow Horace Sackville shall receive the appointment of lord steward of my household," said the prince. "The post has been vacant for these last ten days, and I cannot more worthily fill it up than by the nomination of my charming Venetia's husband."

"And the name which I bear was also to be gilded with a peerage," murmured Venetia, now displaying all her most winning seductiveness.

"That condition shall likewise be kept, angel that thou art!" cried the regent, straining her in his arms. "Hast thou aught more to demand?"

"Nothing," responded Venetia, her countenance radiant with joy and triumph.

"And thou art mine?" said the prince; "tell me that thou art mine!"

"Yes, I am thine," she murmured, her voice suddenly

sinking to a dying tone, as her head drooped upon his shoulder and she fell upon his breast.

It was still dark, at an early hour in the morning, when Venetia stole forth from the private door of Carlton Palace. She was enveloped in her ample cloak and the thick veil was drawn completely over her countenance, so that not even the most prying eye could discover the brilliant heroine of our tale through that deep disguise.

Hurrying to the nearest hackney-coach stand, she entered a vehicle and ordered the driver to proceed toward Knightsbridge. When within a short distance of Acacia Cottage, she stopped the coach and descended, performing the rest of the way on foot. Immediately upon reaching her home and tapping gently with her hand at the front door, it was opened by Horace; and passing in, she stole noiselessly up-stairs, followed by her husband.

The moment they were together in their chamber, and Venetia had thrown aside her bonnet and cloak, she flung a rapid and anxious glance upon her husband, by the light of the candle which was burning upon the toilet-table. She saw that his countenance was very pale, but that he endeavoured to subdue the emotion which he felt; and throwing herself into his arms, she gave vent to a violent fit of weeping.

"For Heaven's sake, tranquillize yourself, my dearest Venetia," murmured Horace, in a soothing tone, as he strained her to his breast. "These sobs will be overheard; the domestics will soon be about in the house, and they will catch the sounds of your grief."

"But do you not now hate, loathe, and despise me?" asked Venetia, suddenly wiping her eyes and gazing anxiously up into his countenance.

"Do you not hate, loathe, and despise me for having permitted this?" he inquired, with some degree of bitterness in his tone. "But let us not enter again and again and again upon the discussion of a subject on which we have already talked so seriously and so often, and which indeed," he added, "has now proceeded too far to admit of recall."

"Yes, but has it left no regret behind, Horace?" asked Venetia.

"In one sense, certainly," he exclaimed. "But the necessity which has ruled us was almost as inexorable as destiny

itself. Indeed, it was our destiny, and therefore regret is useless. Rather let us look to the brightest side — "

" Oh, yes, if you really have the heart to do so," exclaimed Venetia, joyfully. " Well, our ambition will be gratified, our hopes will be realized, and this day's *Gazette* will elevate you to rank and to honour."

" You are to be a peeress, then, Venetia," said Horace, caressing her fondly.

" Yes, because you are to become a peer," she replied.

" And we are to remove to Carlton House? "

" Immediately. The post of lord steward is yours."

" Oh, now you will shine as the most brilliant star in the courtly sphere, my charming Venetia."

" And you will have an opportunity of shining also, my handsome Horace."

" These are indeed dazzling and brilliant prospects," exclaimed the young man; " and I suppose it is mortal destiny that no ambition can be accomplished without the sacrifice of some of our best feelings."

" But if we do not lose our love for each other, Horace," said Venetia, " may we not be happy, even though our happiness be purchased by my dishonour? "

" We will make ourselves happy," observed the husband, emphatically; but still he sighed as he spoke these words, and the forcefulness of his accentuation was only assumed suddenly to drown that sigh.

Venetia sighed also, for she was not so far tainted with depravity, especially after this her first fault, as to be otherwise than keenly sensible of the fact that it was now a polluted woman whom her husband was clasping in his arms. They retired to rest, for it was still too early to go downstairs; and Venetia was glad when the candle was extinguished and she could conceal her countenance from the eyes of Horace, for it was suffused with burning blushes.

But they slept, and at a late hour they rose; and now the first feelings of embarrassment, confusion, and even grief had subsided. They began to look their shame more boldly in the face, and the result was that they could soon look at each other also without blushing. The forbidden fruit was plucked and eaten, they had quitted the paradise of nuptial purity, they now knew all their moral nakedness, and speedily ceased to be ashamed. It appeared as if by a

mutual but tacit resolve they had suddenly determined to avoid the topic altogether; and they now looked forward to the happiness that was to be derived from brilliancy of position, rather than from the sweet and unimpaired domesticity of the married state.

Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope were staying with Miss Bathurst in Stratton Street; and thus the newly married pair had no one to observe the changing condition of their minds. The servants were of course ignorant that Venetia had passed the greater portion of the night away from home, and thus her honour was likewise safe.

In the course of the day two official documents were delivered at Acacia Cottage. One contained the patent elevating Mr. Horace Sackville to the rank of a baron of the realm, by the style and title of Lord Sackville; the second appointed him to the post of lord steward in the household of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

The entire fashionable world was struck with astonishment at these announcements, when they appeared in the *Gazette*, and there was no difficulty in attributing them to the fact that the newly created nobleman possessed as his wife the most beautiful woman in England. But scandal dared not raise its voice too loud, much less openly point a scornful finger at Lord and Lady Sackville, inasmuch as the matrimonial gloss was shed upon whatever amount of frailty there might be in the matter. The consequence was that for several days running Acacia Cottage was crowded with visitors who called to congratulate the noble pair, and the Knightsbridge road was thronged with the carriages of what is called the élite of the aristocracy hastening thither to pay their court to the new lord steward and the prince's new mistress.

At the end of the week Horace and Venetia removed to the apartments which had been provided for them in Carlton House, — the faithful Jessica, Plumpstead, and the serious-looking footman still remaining in their service.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GIBBET

Between nine and ten o'clock on Sunday evening several groups of persons began to collect in the Old Bailey, but chiefly in the wide open space opposite Newgate. During the past week the recorder had made his report to the prince regent relative to the state of the prison, and in that report one individual was named as being under sentence of death. In the case of this person it appeared as if the law was to be allowed to take its course, for a warrant had been issued for his execution, and hence the assembling of the groups of idlers on the eve of the fatal Monday.

The person thus alluded to was Paul Dysart.

Chill and misty was this Sunday evening, dark, sombre, and awe-inspiring was the aspect of Newgate through the deepening gloom. Shivering, ragged, half-starved wretches gathered near the debtor's door, whispering, as they pointed to it, "That's the place the man who's to be hung will come out of to-morrow morning!" Others posted themselves on the very spot close by where the scaffold would be placed, saying, in subdued voices, "It is just here that the drop will fall beneath his feet!" Farther on, other groups were collected near the entrance of the press-yard, observing amongst themselves, "The gibbet will be wheeled out of this place!" In fact, there was not a scene, a spot, nor a detail connected with the awful tragedy of a public execution that escaped comment or explanation on the part of the idlers who were already gathering to the theatre of the forthcoming spectacle.

Soon after ten o'clock on this same Sunday evening a private carriage drove up to the Saracen's Head on Snow Hill, and six gentlemen alighted.

" You can come for us to-morrow morning at nine o'clock," said one of the party, addressing himself to the livery servant in attendance upon the carriage.

" Yes, my lord," was the reply.

" What makes you say nine, Curzon? " demanded another of the party. " It will be all over at five minutes past eight."

" But we shall stop to see the body cut down after hanging an hour, eh? " exclaimed the earl.

" Ah! that's different," observed the other. " I forgot this portion of the ceremony," he added, coolly, as he whiffed his cigar. " To be sure! We won't miss any act in the Newgate drama."

His companions laughed, and as the carriage drove away, they all entered the coffee-room of the Saracen's Head, cracking jokes and indulging in a variety of witty sayings and repartees as they traversed the inn-yard.

The party consisted of the Earl of Curzon, who is already well known to our readers, the Honourable George Macnamara and Lieutenant Apsley, both of whom have been previously mentioned, Lord Plantagenet Tithtide, a young nobleman who had just come of age and just got into the House of Commons for a pocket-borough in the gift of his father, the Duke of Addlebranes, the Marquis of Brandyford, a peer of the realm, and who infinitely preferred the excitement of wrenching off knockers to taking part in the prosy debates of the Upper House, and Count d'Orsayville, a foreign adventurer who had worked his way into the very best society, so that he set the fashion for all the male members of the higher class, and was an immense favourite amongst all the ladies of the same sphere. The count sported a beautiful moustache, was really very handsome, possessed the most fascinating manners, and wore a semimilitary cloak the cut of which was the envy of all his male acquaintances.

On entering the coffee-room, this delectable party flung themselves each upon a chair, one yawning, another sprawling out his legs, a third putting his legs upon an adjacent table, a fourth laughing heartily at nothing, a fifth uttering an oath by way of amusement (for he had really nought to swear at), and the Earl of Curzon (who made the sixth) ringing the bell so furiously that the wire snapped in twain.

" Now, waiter," said this last-mentioned personage, when the tavern functionary made his appearance, " we want a private sitting-room for the night."

" Yes, my lord," responded the waiter, to whom the Earl of Curzon was known.

" And no end of whithkey punth," cried Lord Plantagenet Tithtide, who had the misfortune to lisp somewhat, — a circumstance which did not disqualify him from becoming a Member of Parliament, because he was a lord.

" And a box of the best cigars, wai-tar! " roared out the Marquis of Brandyford. " Now mind they're good, you unhung scoundrel, you, or, by Jove, I'll punch your head into a jelly for you! "

" And a demn'd good fire bethidth," added Lord Plantagenet. " But don't neglecth the whithkey punth, you pwethiouth wathcal! "

" Vot you call de viskey pohnch vare good, — vare good," observed the Count d'Orsayville.

The waiter promised instantaneous compliance with all the instructions he had received; and as he retired from the room the Marquis of Brandyford sent the cushion of a chair spinning after him, but the domestic, who was well on his guard against his lordship's tricks, nimbly avoided the missile. The freak, however, caused the entire party to laugh immoderately, and Lord Plantagenet Tithtide declared that it was " ekthellenth sporth," while the count exclaimed, " Vare good! Vare good! "

In the course of half an hour the private sitting-room was announced to be in readiness, and thither the aristocratic company repaired, the Marquis of Brandyford tripping up a commercial traveller whom they met upon the stairs, and then gravely apologizing to him for the " accidental occurrence." This proceeding excited another burst of uproarious laughter, which was prolonged by the circumstance of the said humourous marquis kissing an old charwoman of seventy who was clearing away some things upon the landing.

The room to which the waiter escorted the party was the best in the house; for although the landlord was fully prepared to find everything smashed to pieces in the morning, he was equally aware that his bill for the damage would be liberally paid, — and, indeed, he was not altogether sorry at the prospect of thus having an opportunity of furnishing

that particular apartment anew. A blazing fire roared halfway up the chimney, dessert, wine, and materials for punch were spread upon the table, and a box of cigars likewise greeted the view of the aristocratic convivialists.

"Now we'll make ourselves comfortable till the morning," said the Honourable George Macnamara.

"And I'll brew the punch," exclaimed Lieutenant Apsley, tucking up his coat-sleeves.

"No bwandy nor wum, Apthley, mind!" observed Lord Plantagenet; "only whithkey, and be thure and queeth loth of lemonth."

"I'll be hanged if I'll drink any of your infernal concoctions," vociferated Lord Brandyford. "True to my name, I mean to get as drunk as blazes on brandy."

"Vare good, markee, vare good!" exclaimed the count. "You shall have de true English taste. But why for you not have de portare? Wot you call de pot of portare most best for you, markee, me tink."

"Oh, deuce take the swipes when one means to get jolly," said the marquis.

"Tho I thay," cried Lord Plantagenet. "You thould wub the lumpth of thugar againth the peel of the lemonth, Apthley. If you don't, you'll not thucktheed in bwewing punth at all dwinkable."

"Leave Apsley to manage it, Tithtide," said the Earl of Curzon. "He always brews for the guards' mess, and no one can do it better. I wonder what the devil Dysart is thinking of now. He little suspects that so many of his friends are at hand to see him dance his last fling."

"Vare good! Vare good!" ejaculated the count.

"But if a wepwieve thould come at the lath moment, we thall be mithewably balked and diththappointed. It would weally be too bad of Dythart to acthept it after all the twouble we've given ourthelvth."

"Dat vare good, milor, vare good!" cried the count, almost going into ecstasies.

"I saw the prince yesterday," said Curzon, "and he assured me that, as the jury did not recommend Dysart to mercy, he had no alternative but to allow the law to take its course."

"Oh! if the pwinth said that," cried Lord Plantagenet, a considerable weight now taken from his mind, "we are all

thafe. I never yet thaw an ekthecuthion, and wouldn't mith the pwethent occathion for a thouthand guineath."

"Vare good!" cried the count. "'Tis de fine old English custom to hang up as many of de English people as de law shall allow."

"Ah! we beat you, count, you see," exclaimed the Marquis of Brandyford, "in our public executions. Give me the excitement of one good hanging-scene in preference to all your guillotining."

"Tho I thay," said the lisping nobleman, who was amazingly fond of hearing himself talk. "But I am athtonithed that the influenth of Lady Ernethtina and the Marquith of Levethon did not thucktheed in getting Dythart off."

"The marquis hates him," said Curzon. "Moreover, he is on the Continent, and I have no doubt he went thither to be out of the way at the present time."

"Well, I cannot say that I ever liked Dysart much," observed Lieutenant Apsley, as he squeezed the lemons into the punch-bowl. "Besides, that affair with young Sefton was a downright murder."

"To be sure," exclaimed the Honourable George Macnamara, "and he deserves to be hanged for it. But, by the bye, we must tell that scoundrel of a waiter not to go to bed all night, as we shall want breakfast at six or seven o'clock in the morning."

"And let us send him to hire a couple of windows for us exactly facing Newgate," suggested the Marquis of Brandyford.

"Yeth, we muth take care and wetain fwont theath to witneth the performanth," cried Lord Plantagenet.

"Vare good! Vare good!" exclaimed the count.

The waiter was accordingly summoned; and having received his instructions in pursuance of the resolves just adopted, he departed at once to secure a couple of windows at some house fronting the prison. In about ten minutes he returned with the gratifying intelligence that he had succeeded in retaining a first-floor room opposite Newgate, for the moderate sum of ten guineas. This bargain was pronounced "dirt cheap" by the aristocratic band of elegants; and the Marquis of Brandyford flung his purse at the waiter's head, bidding him "go and settle for the room, and keep the rest for himself." The purse hit the waiter

upon the right eye, which it completely bunged up; but as the use of the left optic still remained, and as the heaviness of the purse convinced the waiter that it contained a tolerable quantity of golden salve, he took the joke with a proportionate amount of good humour.

But leaving the aristocratic party to the enjoyment of their punch, discourse, and practical freaks, we will penetrate into the prison of Newgate and glance at Mr. Dysart in the condemned cell.

It was now eleven o'clock, and the criminal was alone in that dungeon. Upon the little round table stood a cold fowl and a bottle of wine, to which he was paying his respects with all imaginable ease and comfort; for the nearer the hour approached for him to mount the scaffold, the more joyfully did he look forward to it as the term of the ordeal through which he was passing. In plainer terms, he was so well convinced that the reprieve would be produced the moment the halter was affixed to his neck, and that a free pardon would follow as a matter of course in a few days, that he was actually impatient for the hour which would terminate what he now looked upon as mere " bother, excitement, and annoyance."

Ernestina had visited him daily since his condemnation; and on each occasion she had some new proof to offer of the prince's kind feelings toward him. Moreover, the governor, entirely misled by her representations and obsequiously anxious to oblige her, had given Dysart the most positive assurances that the sheriff would produce the reprieve upon the scaffold. He had even gone so far as to hint the same to the chaplain; and this reverend gentleman, while discussing a bottle of wine with Mr. Dysart in his cell, had reiterated the governor's assurances. Under all these circumstances, therefore, the prisoner entertained no fear as to the result; and while the gathering crowds in the Old Bailey were observing amongst themselves how dreadful his feelings must be, he was comfortably regaling his appetite on a cold capon and an excellent bottle of sherry.

Having partaken of his supper, Dysart undressed and retired to bed, where he speedily fell into a sound sleep. As the night advanced, the multitudes increased outside the gaol, and at five o'clock in the morning the carpenters made their appearance to erect the barrier around the

debtor's door, in order to keep back the pressure of the crowds. Despite the noise of their hammers, the criminal slept on.

At six o'clock the platform of the gallows was wheeled out of the press-yard, and stationed on the verge of the pavement at the debtor's door. The carpenters then proceeded to fix the ladder and erect the huge beams of the gibbet, all their operations being viewed with intense curiosity and deep interest by the multitude that was swelling in bulk and volume every moment.

From an early hour a black fellow, roughly dressed and carrying a huge club in his hand, had been lurking near the debtor's door; and when the barrier was put up, he elbowed his way to a place as near that door as possible. There he remained fixed like a statue, leaning with his arms upon the barrier, and neither addressing a word to a soul nor appearing to pay any attention to the discourse that was going on in his hearing.

It was seven o'clock in the morning before Dysart awoke from his slumber, and he would perhaps have slept on, had not the entrance of the chaplain disturbed him. He inquired the hour, and on being informed, was astonished to hear that it was so late.

" You have slept well? " said the chaplain.

" Never better in my life," responded the criminal, gaily. " I will now get up."

" And in ten minutes I will return," said the chaplain.

The reverend gentleman then quitted the cell, and Dysart proceeded to wash and dress himself with as much unconcern as he had displayed when eating his supper overnight. On the return of the chaplain, he asked if the sheriff had yet arrived, but the response was in the negative. The ordinary then hinted that it would be proper for them to join in prayer, but Dysart exclaimed, " You don't think, sir, that it is at all necessary just now, do you? "

" Prayer is always seasonable and of much avail," was the chaplain's response.

" But you feel convinced that I shall be reprieved? " said Dysart, with some little manifestation of uneasiness, or rather, perhaps, of impatience.

" The governor has assured me that such will be the case," answered the ordinary, " and I believe him to be far too

cautious a man to venture such a statement unless on good authority."

"When the sheriff comes I can ask him," observed Dysart.

"My good friend, that will be a breach of confidence," said the chaplain, in a tone or remonstrance, "and would probably lead to the loss of our situations for both the governor and myself."

"True! I had forgotten that," exclaimed Dysart. "Will you be so kind as to ask the governor to come to me?"

"Certainly," replied the chaplain; and he once more quitted the cell.

When left alone, Dysart walked backward and forward with a restlessness that he had not before experienced. He endeavoured to shake off the feeling, but it was rapidly growing upon him. Horrible thoughts began to spring up in his mind. What if the prince should have been playing him false all along, or alter his resolve at the last moment? What if Ernestina had been deceiving him? Or suppose that every intention and every assurance had been sincere in those quarters, might not the reprieve come too late? These thoughts were dreadful. The unhappy man, hitherto lulled into complete security, had now suddenly awakened, as it were, to a galling, goading, agonizing sense of the tremendous fact that his life hung to a thread. He would have screamed out, — he could have yelled with mortal anguish, but at the instant the paroxysm reached its crisis the chaplain returned to the cell, followed by the governor.

The expression of the two functionaries' countenances instantaneously relieved Dysart's awful terrors. The effect was the same as the sudden pouring of oil upon the raging billows; and even before a word was spoken, he felt angry with himself for having yielded to the influence of such agonizing alarm.

"Good morning, Mr. Dysart," said the governor, taking him by the hand; then, in a lower voice, he added, "A sealed packet from the Home Office, directed to the sheriff, has just arrived. But for Heaven's sake do not appear to know this fact; it is as much as my place is worth to have told you."

"Not on any consideration would I injure you, my dear sir," answered Dysart, joyfully pressing the governor's hand, "after all your kindness to me. But is the sheriff

come? Has he opened the packet? Does it contain the reprieve? "

"It cannot possibly be anything else," returned the governor. "The sheriff will not be here till a quarter to eight, nor will he open the packet in my presence. I dare not even ask him what it contains, but I have not the slightest — no, not the slightest doubt — "

"What o'clock is it now?" demanded the criminal, hurriedly.

"Half-past seven. Will you take some breakfast? Indeed, you must appear as if you anticipated the very worst," said the governor, with marked emphasis.

"Since I have nothing to apprehend, I can assume an air which shall pass for firmness," replied Dysart. "Yes, let me have some breakfast; it will warm me."

Leaving the interior of the prison for a few moments, we will again glance to the aspect of the scene outside.

The morning was dull and gloomy, and soon after the break of day, a fine mizzling rain had begun to fall. The crowd was immense. To the farther extremity of the Old Bailey in the one direction, and to the very verge of Smithfield market on the other, it was a complete ocean of human faces. Men and women, — numbers of the latter with young children in their arms, — boys and girls, even of a tender age, all were packed as densely as the aggregation of such a mass of life could possibly become. Every window and housetop commanding a view of the gaol's front and the looming gallows had been put into requisition by the anxious spectators. Precisely opposite the gibbet, a first-floor apartment was tenanted for the nonce by the aristocrats who had passed the night at the Saracen's Head; and having well breakfasted off devilled kidneys, coffee, and toast, these worthies found themselves in an excellent humour to enjoy the drama about to be enacted.

At a quarter to eight one of the sheriffs, the two undersheriffs, and a couple of aldermen arrived at the gaol. They were immediately ushered into the governor's drawing-room, and the sealed packet from the Home Office was delivered to the sheriff. He at once retired into a private room to open it, and having perused the contents, which were laconic enough, he carefully consigned the despatch to his pocket. On returning to the drawing-room, his countenance, re-

maining as composed as before, afforded not the least indication of the nature of the official document which he had received, while etiquette forbade even the under-sheriffs to venture an inquiry upon the point.

" I understood you on Saturday," said the sheriff, addressing himself to the governor, " that there was no person then engaged to officiate as the functionary of the law."

" And such is still the case, sir," replied the governor. " I believed that some criminal within the walls would have accepted the post of public executioner, but only a few minutes before your arrival the turnkeys assured me that not a single soul would undertake the office."

" Then a proclamation must be made to the multitude outside the prison," said the sheriff. " I will proceed to fulfil that duty at once."

Accordingly, followed by the under-sheriffs and the governor, the high civic functionary repaired to the debtor's door, and ascending the steps of the gallows, he mounted the platform. A dead silence fell upon the congregated mass of people, the murmuring of their myriad voices suddenly ceasing, and the oscillation of the living waves subsiding into a calm. Every eye was fixed with an expression of curiosity and suspense upon the sheriff, as he proceeded to make the proclamation, which was to the effect that an individual was required to undertake the office of public executioner, and that should such volunteering individual have in any way rendered himself amenable or obnoxious to the law, he (the sheriff) was empowered to offer him a free pardon for his offences.

Scarcely were the words spoken, when a loud voice exclaimed, " I accept the proposition! " and the savage-looking black fellow already mentioned jumped upon the barrier and scrambled up to the platform of the gallows.

" Hooray! " shouted the multitudes, which for a moment had feared that they were to be balked of the spectacle they had crowded thither to behold.

Nor less were the aristocratic exquisites at the two windows opposite rejoiced to find that the drama would proceed without the interruption that had for an instant appeared to threaten its tragic development.

The sheriff descended from the scaffold and reëntered the prison, followed by the under-sheriffs, the governor,

and the volunteer hangman; and, the clock having now struck eight, they all proceeded to the condemned cell, where Dysart and the chaplain were together.

The criminal, fully satisfied that his reprieve was in the sheriff's pocket, presented an aspect of firmness and bowed courteously to the civic authorities. These functionaries remained in the passage outside the door of the cell, which was now left open, and the sheriff, addressing himself to the chaplain, said, " I wish to speak to you a moment."

The ordinary hastened out of the cell, and as the sheriff drew him aside a little way down the corridor, Dysart perceived that he drew forth from his pocket a despatch of the invariable official shape and bearing a large seal.

" That is my reprieve! " thought Dysart, and the flood of life circulated with a more rapid flow in his veins.

" Beg pardon, sir," said the volunteer hangman, producing his whipcord to pinion the criminal's arms; then, as he drew the criminal gently aside toward the farther extremity of the cell, he hastily whispered, " You've nothing to fear, Mr. Dysart. The sheriff has got your reprieve, and I have seen it."

The criminal had recoiled loathingly from the first touch of the hangman, and the more so on account of his repulsive look, for the fellow's face was black as that of a negro; but the voice instantaneously sounded familiar to Dysart's ear, and surveying the wretch's countenance attentively, he recognized through the soot and grime that covered it the features of Daniel Coffin.

Glancing toward the door, and observing that no one was noticing him particularly at the instant, Dysart gave the Hangman a nod of recognition; then, in a scarcely audible tone, he said, " You have positively seen the reprieve? "

" I saw the sheriff show it to the under-sheriffs, and even heard him read the private instructions on the margin, returned Coffin, in an equally low voice, as he pinioned the arms of the criminal.

" And those instructions — what are they? " demanded Dysart, with nervous impatience.

" That the reprieve will not be produced till the moment the drop is ready to fall," responded the Hangman. " So you needn't be alarmed, sir; and in a quarter of an hour

you will find yourself safe and sound back in this cell again."

"You are a good fellow, Coffin, for being anxious thus to reassure me," said Dysart, trembling somewhat with excitement, but not from actual fear.

"You've always behaved like a gentleman to me, sir," replied the Hangman, "and I should have been sorry indeed to tuck you up. But now's the time to move for'ard."

Having thus spoken in a hurried whisper, the Hangman signified aloud to the governor that everything was ready, and the procession was formed. The chaplain and sheriff, who had remained outside together conversing in the passage, went first. Then came Dysart, with his arms pinioned, and closely followed by the Hangman, the governor, undersheriffs, aldermen, and a few of the gaol officials bringing up the rear.

Along two or three stone passages did the mournful procession advance; and now the tolling of St. Sepulchre's bell became more and more plainly audible to the ear. Again did a sudden terror strike to the very heart's core of the criminal. Heavens! if the reprieve, the assurances that had hitherto sustained him, the promise of life, pardon, and liberty, — O God! if all these were but the delusions of his brain, the phantoms of his own imagination! That knell which rang so ominously, the solemn tread of the procession through the vaulted passages, the murmuring of the multitudes without, and now the deep voice of the chaplain commencing the service for the dead, — oh, what could all this mean? What did it signify? Wherefore this tremendous parade, this pomp and display of death itself, if all were to end in a continuance of life? And that chaplain's voice, did it breathe an accent of hope? Oh, no, no! It was profound, solemn, even sepulchral, as if warning him in unmistakable tones that this was indeed no mockery, but an awful, appalling, stupendous reality. Yes, there was death in all this, — death — death! And the hideous conviction struck to the soul of Dysart that he was duped, deluded, deceived, — ay, unto the very verge of that grave which was already yawning at his feet.

Such were the thoughts that swept, ghastly as a train of spectres and swift as a flight of birds, through the imagina-

tion of Dysart. But the next instant his presence of mind returned, and all in a moment did he marshal and review in his fancy the circumstances that were favourable to him. The governor had solemnly affirmed that a despatch had arrived from the Home Office; he himself had seen the sheriff produce this despatch in order to display it to the chaplain; and Daniel Coffin had given him assurances relative to the nature of its contents. It must be, then, a reprieve — it could be nothing else; oh, no, it could be nothing else!

But this hideous uncertainty, — the agonies, the tortures, the excruciations of a thousand racks were comprised therein. Oh, if he had not been so rash, so precipitate in trusting to others! If he had accepted the alternative of the three years' imprisonment, he would at least have been spared these immitigable horrors, these rending agonies. But was it too late? No; he would tell the sheriff and the governor everything, — how his wife held the solemnly recorded pledge of the prince regent, how the compromise of three years' imprisonment had been offered him, and how he would now rather accept this proposal than proceed any farther in the pathway which terminated at the scaffold.

But, oh, miserable wretch that he was, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, he could not speak, he felt as if burning ashes were in his throat. Horror of horrors! what was he to do? Fleet and fast did his thoughts thus travel through his brain. Travel! They swept along quicker than the lightning. A whole volume would not contain the reflections which he thus made in the time that his feet were only taking a dozen steps. The page which now affords a succinct outline of those thoughts sinks into utter insignificance when compared with the vast folios and bulky tomes that these ideas, if chronicled at length, would fill. His brain was on fire; it whirled, whirled, and yet he could not give utterance to a single one of those myriad million thoughts that were thus sweeping, dashing, flying, gushing, tearing through that maddening brain.

And now the breeze suddenly blows more freshly upon his countenance, and at the same instant his eyes, plunging through the opening of a low narrow doorway, recoil, as it were, from the sinister object which bursts upon them. For he is now traversing the little kitchen which is just

inside that ominous-looking door whereon no eye ever fails to linger a moment when passing along the front of Newgate.

"Courage!" whispers a voice in Dysart's ear; he looks aside for an instant, and beholds the blackened countenance of the Hangman.

Recalled to himself, as it were, from a hideous dream in which he appeared to have been walking, Dysart does summon all his courage to his aid; and fortunately for the complete gathering of his presence of mind at this supreme moment, he observes something white projecting from the sheriff's pocket. Ah! it is the reprieve, — the reprieve which he has placed thus handy, so that it may be drawn forth in a moment. After all, Dysart feels that he is safe; and he ascends the steps of the scaffold, pinioned and trussed for death, with the conviction that he shall speedily descend those steps again to enter upon a new lease of life.

A solemn stillness once more falls upon the crowd, and not a murmur is heard. His is not a crime which calls for the expression of public opinion in yells and execrations, and therefore not a reproachful voice is heard, not an abusive syllable is uttered.

A dimness comes upon Dysart's eyes; he closes them hard, then opens them promptly again, and his sight has now a horrible clearness. The rapid glance which he flings right and left shows him the countless myriads of human faces all turned toward that black funereal eminence on which he stands. The knell of St. Sepulchre's Church falls like a sledge-hammer upon his brain. The eyes of the multitudes seem to pierce him through and through. And these are his sensations during the first quarter of a minute that he stands upon the scaffold; but then in that quarter of a minute are concentrated whole ages and ages of sense, feeling, faculty, and circumstance.

He is now recalled to a livelier and keener appreciation of his position by the touch of the Hangman, who nevertheless again breathes the word "Courage" in his ear. He strives to speak; but at the instant his lips are wavering, the halter circles his neck. A shriek rises to the very tip of his tongue, but it is stifled by the sudden drawing down of the nightcap over his face. Then the fingers of the Hangman are lifted from him, and he hears the wretch hasten away,

his heavy feet stamping upon the hollow platform and then rushing down the ladder.

For never, never were all Dysart's faculties and organs of sense so acute as upon the present occasion; his very looks can penetrate dimly through the cotton nightcap drawn over his face.

But ah! the sudden sound as of a bolt touched beneath his feet came thrilling up to his ear; and now again — but oh, with what an overwhelming force! — struck upon his soul the conviction that he was betrayed. Yes, now 'twas sure, certain, beyond all doubt. O horror, horror! horror of horrors! he was there on the drop — 'twas giving way beneath his feet — "

It fell! The blood gushed upward like lightning into his brain, strong spasms convulsed him, and in a few moments he hung a lifeless corpse.

The aristocratic party at the windows opposite remained until nine o'clock, when the body was cut down. They then returned to the Saracen's Head, paid the bill liberally, and took their departure in the Earl of Curzon's carriage toward the West End.

But in the meantime the governor of Newgate was entertaining the sheriff, the under-sheriffs, and the chaplain at breakfast, according to the custom which prevailed in those times relative to the mornings of public execution.

" Poor Lady Ernestina!" said the governor, " she will be dreadfully cut up. She all along made sure of her husband being reprieved; and when she left him last evening she expressed her conviction that she should meet him again to-day. From what she condescended to tell me, I also made certain that the extreme sentence would never be carried out."

" Such also was my opinion," observed the chaplain. " In fact, when you, sir," — addressing himself to the sheriff, — " called me out of the prisoner's cell and produced that paper from your pocket, I made sure that it was the reprieve. You might have observed how startled I was when I looked over its contents."

" I did not pay particular notice," said the sheriff, with an air of indifference, as he ate his muffin. " But, by the bye, you did not see it," he observed, turning toward the governor and the under-sheriffs.

Thus speaking, he tossed the paper across the table; and the individuals to whom he had last addressed himself hastened to make themselves acquainted with its contents.

It ran as follows:

HOME OFFICE, Saturday evening, Oct. 20.

"SIR: — I am desired by the secretary of state to direct your attention to the demoralizing effect of capital criminals addressing observations from the scaffold to the assembled crowd; and it is requisite that this display, which has been much too common of late, should be prevented. I have therefore to request that henceforth the scene outside the gaol of Newgate, on the occasion of a public execution, shall be abbreviated as much as possible; and I have further to desire that you will have the goodness to communicate this letter to the reverend ordinary of Newgate.

"I have the honour to remain, etc.

"*To the Sheriff of London.*"

This despatch was duly signed by the under-secretary of state for the Home Department. The governor, on reading it, exchanged significant glances with the chaplain, as much as to imply their regret at having been led by circumstances to buoy up Dysart with the hope of a reprieve until nearly the last minute; but they nevertheless kept the matter scrupulously secret in their own breasts. Nor did the governor entertain the slightest suspicion that he had all along been made a tool in the hands of Lady Ernestina Dysart, in thus lulling her husband into a false security.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PREFECTURE OF POLICE

A MONTH had now elapsed since Jocelyn Loftus was so suddenly consigned to a mysterious imprisonment in Paris, on the ground of some defect or error of nomenclature in his passport; and it will be remembered that he was thus held captive, by order of the prefect of police, at the mansion of the prefecture itself.

The room to which he was conducted has already been described as small and indifferently appointed. A tent-bedstead in an alcove, or recess, a table, a couple of chairs, a washing-stand, and two or three other necessaries, constituted the furniture. There were two windows, each well protected with iron bars, and looking down into a gloomy courtyard surrounded with the high walls belonging to other portions of the same building, so that escape in that quarter appeared to be impossible. The door was massive and studded with large iron nails; bolts had creaked and chains had rattled outside when it was closed upon the prisoner; and indeed every circumstance but too plainly indicated that this was in all respects a prison-chamber. Let us add that it was on the first story and was approached by a long dark corridor, in which Jocelyn was occasionally allowed to walk, and our description is as complete as the purposes of the narrative require.

We stated that while Jocelyn was being conveyed in the hackney-coach to the prefecture of police, his own conjectures furnished him with some faint glimmering of the real truth as to the cause of his arrest. The brief examination he had undergone before the prefect himself confirmed those suspicions which he had already entertained; nor had he much difficulty in divining who was the real author of his present

imprisonment. He therefore now blamed himself bitterly for having rushed so precipitately on the enterprise with the name of Jocelyn Loftus.

But now let us specially note the incidents of his first day's incarceration. At about one o'clock a domestic in the prefect's livery brought in a tray furnished with copious materials for a succulent repast, but it may be well understood that Jocelyn was in no particular humour to partake of it. The man, without being precisely stern-looking, was evidently of a cold and reserved disposition, a character well suited for such a place as the prefecture and such functions as those which he had to fulfil. Jocelyn did not question him; for, in the first place, he was tolerably well convinced that this menial could know nothing of the secrets regarding his captivity, and, secondly, even if he did, he was still more certain not to betray them.

Before quitting the room, the domestic said, in a tone that was coldly polite, " I am commanded, sir, to wait upon you with your meals three times a day, and on each occasion whatever orders you may wish to give shall be obeyed, consistently with the regulations of the place. Books and writing materials you can have — "

" Yes, bring me books and writing materials," exclaimed Jocelyn, to whom it was at least some consolation to perceive that he was not to be treated with any extraordinary degree of severity.

The domestic retired, and shortly afterward reappeared, bringing with him a large parcel of books and an ample supply of writing materials; but as he deposited them in the recess of one of the deep-set windows, he remarked, " You are at liberty, sir, to write as much as you choose within these walls, but I must beg you to understand that not a scrap of paper can pass hence without being previously examined by his Excellency the prefect.

Having thus spoken, the man again departed, carefully locking and bolting the door behind him; and when once more alone, Loftus began to examine the books which had been brought him. They belonged to almost every branch of literature, — novels, poetry, travels, voyages, history, politics, science, and art; but he started back in sudden dismay from this perfect cyclopedia of amusement and instruction, for the thought flashed to his mind that here was indeed

enough reading to while away the time of a twelvemonths' imprisonment. The next moment, however, he felt angry with himself for having allowed the incident to operate as an omen or a presage; and he murmured, half-aloud, "The domestic who brought those books could not possibly be aware whether my captivity is destined to last days or years."

Then, with characteristic courage, Loftus conjured up every possible reflection of a soothing, hopeful, or consolatory nature.

In the evening the domestic reappeared with the prisoner's supper, which also consisted of several dishes and a liberal supply of wine. Candles were furnished without restriction as to the period of their use, so that Loftus could burn them throughout the night if he felt disposed. In the morning the breakfast that was served up to him was as copious as the other meals; and when he had partaken of the repast, an old woman was introduced by the domestic to make the bed and sweep out the room, during which process Jocelyn was permitted to walk up and down the long dark passage outside.

We have now afforded an idea of the routine of Jocelyn's first day at the prefecture, and thence an estimate may be drawn of the monotonous nature of his imprisonment during the month which we must suppose to have elapsed since the date of his arrest. It will, however, be seen that he was treated at the prefecture of police with as much consideration as was compatible with the circumstances of personal restraint. But was he happy? Far, very far from that! His natural courage, noble fortitude, and elevated spirit enabled him to bear up as well as the most heroic of men could do against the misfortune which had overtaken him, but still there were moments when he could scarcely restrain an outburst of bitter anguish as he thought of his much-loved and far-off Louisa. What could she think of a silence so unaccountable and an absence so prolonged? Must she not either believe him false, or else that some terrible calamity had befallen him? In either case, he pictured to himself all the anguish which that charming creature was thus doomed to endure; and it went to his soul to reflect that so young, so lovely, and so affectionate a being should be plunged into such deep distress.

On several occasions he had written a letter to the prefect, beseeching that any correspondence which should have arrived for him at Meurice's Hotel or at the general post-office of Paris might be given up to him; but the verbal answer which the reserved domestic invariably brought back was to the effect "that no communications had been received at all, at either place, addressed to Mr. Jocelyn Loftus."

These announcements the young gentleman knew full well to be false, for he was convinced that Louisa would have unweariedly and incessantly written letter after letter, craving, imploring, and beseeching a response; and it was therefore with as much bitterness of spirit as indignation of feeling that Loftus came to the conclusion that the same arbitrary police power which had violated the sanctity of his private papers on the day of his arrest had likewise taken possession of all correspondence that had subsequently arrived for him from England.

Our young hero's state of mind was not, therefore, very felicitous; and a month had thus passed in deep uncertainties, varying excitements, and perplexing anxieties.

One night Jocelyn had retired to rest earlier than usual, for his health had begun to fail him in the close captivity of that chamber, and, moreover, he had been giving way with a very painful intensity to the poignancy of his thoughts during the evening. The clocks in the thousand towers of the sovereign city of France were proclaiming the hour of nine when, having extinguished the light, Jocelyn thus sought his couch, exhausted alike in mind and body. A deep slumber fell upon him, and he was gradually borne into the Elysian mazes of a delicious dream.

He fancied that he was sleeping on a splendid sofa in a magnificently furnished apartment; he thought he saw himself thus reclining full dressed, as if it were in the daytime that he had lain down in this manner to rest for a short while. The saloon to which imagination had thus wafted him was flooded with a golden light, — a more than earthly radiance that penetrated throughout, a celestial lustre that rendered each nook and corner as clear and shadowless as the centre of the room itself. And now, in the midst of that transcendent glow, it appeared to Jocelyn as if angels were passing through the ambrosial air, beauteous

forms displaying a lithe and slender symmetry in the scant azure drapery that floated with the grace which no sculptural skill could ever illustrate in the massive marble. Some of these empyrean beings were crowned with stars; others bore lutes which seemed to send forth a delicious music, realizing the sweet superstition of the harmony of the spheres; while others, again, carried garlands of flowers in their hands, or scattered wreaths and posies through the translucent atmosphere. But as the celestial train swept past, every angelic countenance was bent with an expression of sweet encouragement and smiling hopefulness upon the sleeping form of Jocelyn; and as he slowly awoke from this delicious dream, while the glory of the vision itself faded slowly and gradually away from his mental perception, he could not help thinking that it was an intimation sent from Heaven to cheer his soul.

While in the fervour of his grateful piety he was silently breathing a prayer to his Maker, he was suddenly startled by a singular noise which seemed to come from within the wainscoting of the alcove or recess that contained the couch whereon he lay. He listened; the noise ceased. He concluded that he had been mistaken, and he endeavoured to compose himself to slumber again. But just as his eyelids were closing beneath the batlike wing of drowsiness, that strange sound was repeated.

He started up, held his breath, and listened more attentively than at first. The noise was like that of some one endeavouring to pierce through the masonry by means of an instrument that worked tediously in a stealthy, scraping manner, rather than with a boldness which cared not for discovery. The thought instantly struck Jocelyn that some prisoner in the next apartment was endeavouring to escape; and this idea thrilled with a sensation of joy to his heart, for the same means which could afford the hope of flight to a fellow captive would avail also for himself.

The noise continued, and Jocelyn was on the point of knocking gently in order to lead the individual, whoever it might be, into conversation, supposing that a sufficient depth of excavation in the wall had been made to render their voices audible to each other; but the young gentleman checked himself and paused to reflect ere he took any step whatsoever in the matter. Once more reposing his head upon his pillow,

but still listening attentively, he reasoned in the following strain:

"If this be some fellow captive who is endeavouring to make his escape, he may perchance have been led to believe that the wall through which he is boring opens either into an empty room or an unfrequented passage, or even perhaps into some courtyard or actual outlet. Such may be his impression; and therefore if I disturb him in the midst of his labours he may become alarmed and desist. It will be better for me to allow him to proceed so far with his work that he will ascertain for himself into what place he is penetrating, and then it will be time enough to make known to him the presence of a fellow prisoner in this room, supposing that he is now unaware of its being tenanted."

Having come to this conclusion, Jocelyn Loftus did not attempt to make himself heard by his neighbour; but he nevertheless continued an attentive listener to the work that was going on. The longer he thus listened the more convinced he became that his first conjecture was well founded, and that it was indeed some fellow prisoner stealthily pursuing the means which he hoped would lead to escape. For two hours did the work thus continue, and by following it minutely with his ears, the young gentleman was enabled to comprehend its details. Thus was it that he could distinguish when pieces of mortar were removed or portions of masonry detached and taken out of the excavation; and at the expiration of those two hours he heard his neighbour replacing all the mortar, stones, and bricks in the hollow thus made between the wainscot, doubtless to conceal the night's work from the eyes of the morning's visitors.

All was now still; but Jocelyn could not again very speedily settle himself to slumber, for an incident had thus arisen not only to break the hitherto monotonous routine of his imprisonment, but also to excite sudden and fervid hopes of escape.

Nevertheless, after awhile sleep once more revisited his eyes, and when he awoke in the morning it was some time before he could persuade himself that the occurrence of the past night was not part and parcel — although perhaps another phase — of that dream which had visited him soon after he had retired to rest.

Having risen from his couch and dressed himself, Jocelyn

awaited the arrival of the serious-looking domestic; and when that individual made his appearance at nine o'clock with the breakfast-tray, the young gentleman inquired, with an apparent air of indifference, whether there were many other prisoners in the prefecture.

"I do not know, sir," was the laconic answer; and Jocelyn felt annoyed within himself for having condescended to even so slight an attempt to gratify his curiosity through the medium of his reserved and flinty-hearted jailor.

After breakfast, the livery servant returned, accompanied, as usual at this hour, by the old charwoman; and while she was occupied in putting the room to rights, Loftus walked, as was his wont, in the adjacent corridor. This passage has already been described as long, dark, and gloomy; it had a door at the end communicating with the staircase, and from the side opened at least a dozen doors into no doubt as many prison-chambers. While walking in this passage on the present occasion, Loftus paused at the door of the room next to his own, and listened to hear if he could catch any sound, but all was still.

In a few minutes the old woman appeared upon the threshold of his apartment, with the intimation that she had finished her avocations therein. This was a signal for him to return to its solitude; and as he did so, the old crone hastily and furtively slipped a note into his hand. He clutched it tight — oh, as tightly as the rope is clutched that is thrown out to the shipwrecked mariner struggling in the waves amidst the boiling surges of an infuriate ocean. The old woman hurried onward, and the serious-looking domestic, who had been lounging at the end of the dark passage, now came to close the door upon our hero once more.

The instant that Jocelyn was again alone he hastened to examine the note that had so strangely been given to him. It was not addressed to any one; it was not sealed, but merely folded up into a small compass, and its contents, which were written in a beautiful female hand, and in the English language, were as follows:

"Fellow Prisoner: — If you value your liberty and are desirous to escape from this dreadful place, lend your assistance to one who is already working to the same end. Be not alarmed, therefore, at any unusual noise which you

may hear or at any strange occurrence that may take place during the coming night, but be in readiness to fulfill any instructions that you may receive. I am told that you are an Englishman, and you will see by this that it is a fellow countrywoman who thus addresses you."

The astonishment of Loftus at thus discovering that his bold and venturous neighbour was a female may be more readily conceived than described. Yes, and by her writing she was evidently a lady of good education. That the old charwoman was an accomplice in her project of escape was evident enough; but how this lady could hope to effect this escape by simply passing from one room into another, Jocelyn was at a loss to imagine. However, that some explanation would take place during the next night appeared tolerably evident, the lady having no doubt been enabled to calculate that it only required a little more labour to pierce entirely through the massive partition wall.

Slow and tardy as the time ever passes to persons in captivity, yet this was the slowest and most tardily lingering day that Jocelyn had yet known in the prefecture of police. He thought the evening would never come; but when at last the sombre shades of twilight obscured his chamber, he even then calculated with considerable impatience that it yet wanted several hours of midnight. However, as nearly everything must have an end sooner or later, so did this wearisome day terminate at last. Nine o'clock struck, the serious-looking domestic, having brought in the supper-tray, retired with his wonted coldly courteous "Good night," and now Loftus felt that he was free from any further interruption on the part of his crabbed janitor.

Candles had been lighted some time; he endeavoured to read, but could not settle his mind to any one subject of all the departments of literature contained in the books at his disposal. He therefore rose from his chair and paced the room in an agitated manner; then he sat down again and perused for the hundredth time that day the mysterious note which he had received in the morning.

Yes, it was indeed a beautiful handwriting, fluent, clear, and delicate as that of an educated Englishwoman. But, ah! if it had only been the writing of his Louisa, what transports of happiness would he now have enjoyed! However,

if the present adventure upon which his neighbour had embarked, and in which he himself was about to participate, if this adventure, we say, should end in the accomplishment of an escape, then, within a very few days, might he fold in his arms that beloved Louisa whose image was ever uppermost in his mind, and on whose behalf he experienced so much anxiety.

The clocks had struck eleven some time when Jocelyn suddenly became aware that the sounds of the previous night were recommencing in the wall of the alcove. He threw himself upon the bed, applied his ear to the wainscot, and listened attentively. Yes, his adventurous neighbour was evidently taking out all the loosened mortar and masonry from the aperture; and in a few minutes he was satisfied that she was continuing the process of perforation by whatsoever instrument it was that she used. Jocelyn continued to listen with breathless attention, until presently he heard the instrument itself come in contact with the wainscot to which his ear was applied. Then suddenly all was still.

"Is that woodwork?" suddenly inquired a soft female voice from the other side.

Jocelyn answered in the affirmative.

"Then if you are indeed anxious to escape," resumed that same musical voice, "or if you will, at all events, assist me to escape, you must contrive to remove a portion of the wainscot."

Jocelyn at once gave the lady such assurances that must have satisfied her both as to his own desire for self-emancipation and his readiness to succour all her heroic attempts. He then drew forth the bedstead from the alcove, and by means of the knife which had been left with his supper-tray, he speedily loosened a panel of the woodwork and lifted it from its setting. He now perceived that an excavation had been made of nearly two feet square through a wall upwards of a foot thick.

"Take all these implements — haste! — quick!" said the lady in the adjoining room; and as she thus spoke impatiently, but with the rich melody of youthfulness in her voice, she thrust several articles through the opening.

These consisted of a ladder made of twisted silk and pieces of fire-wood, two or three files, a bottle containing a yellow

fluid, three or four skeleton keys, and a very diminutive crowbar, the whitened end of which showed that it had been the instrument principally used for making the opening in the wall. The articles were speedily taken charge of by Jocelyn; and the appearance thereof instantaneously confirmed his former suspicion that an escape was to be attempted that night. But he had little leisure for reflection, inasmuch as everything was now haste, bustle, and impatience with the heroic lady. Indeed, no sooner had he removed the above-mentioned articles from the opening through which she had thrust them, than in the hurried but harmonious accents of her voice she said, " Now help me to pass into your chamber."

At the same time a pair of well-rounded, plump and snow-white arms were thrust through the aperture; immediately afterward came a head covered with a thick black veil, followed by a bust whose proportions were fraught with all the first freshness of youth. In fine, our hero, taking hold of the lady's arms, assisted her as well and as delicately as he was able to pass her entire form through the opening.

When this was done and the heroine of the adventure, being raised upon her feet, stood before Jocelyn, the rapid glance which he threw upon her naturally expressed a certain amount of curiosity. He observed that she was of the middle height, with a form of youthful appearance, perfectly symmetrical in shape and characterized by much ladylike elegance. But her head, as already stated, was closely enveloped in a thick black veil; and although she could no doubt see perfectly well from behind the invidious screen, yet it was not equally easy for the eyes of an observer to penetrate through to her own countenance. That she studied Jocelyn earnestly and attentively for several moments, he could judge from the steadiness with which her veiled countenance was fixed toward him; but on his side he could positively distinguish neither trait nor lineament of her countenance at all. We should add that the dark veil, two or three times folded, was not merely thrown loosely over her head, but was tied in such a way around her neck that it served as a perfect mask and was not liable to be displaced by any motion or gesture on her part.

" You are doubtless astonished to see my countenance thus veiled? " said the lady, in the softest and most melting

tones of her musical voice; " but it is in consequence of a solemn vow which I have made."

" A vow? " exclaimed Loftus, in astonishment, and almost with an accent of incredulity and suspicion.

" Yes, it is a vow," answered the lady, with a certain dignity in her tone and a drawing up of her form as if she resented the incredulous manner of our hero, " a vow rashly and precipitately made, it is true, a vow pledged in the moment of despair, but to which I am not the less bound to pay implicit devotion."

" But wherefore so singular a vow? " inquired Jocelyn, now fancying that if the lady were not some adventuress, she was probably of unsettled intellects.

" You think that I am mad? " she said, thus evidently penetrating his thoughts once more, but now speaking in a milder and more mournful tone. " It would be perhaps a blessing for one so profoundly acquainted with sorrow as I am to sink into the oblivion of a benighted intellect, or become a prey to the fanciful vagaries of dreams. But, alas! alas! life has already been and still is too stern a reality for me. Under such circumstances, and considering the absolute necessity which exists for me to give you some explanation, so as to convince you that you are not embarking in this night's enterprise with either an adventuress imprisoned for wrong-doing, or a mad woman confined on account of her malady, for these reasons, I say, you will not deem me vain or frivolous in declaring that it is the beauty of this now veiled countenance which has been the cause of all my misfortunes. Yes, that beauty which, I solemnly declare, I myself value not, has rendered me the object of persecution and even of vengeance on the part of a host of great, noble, and powerful admirers to whose honeyed words I would not listen. Being my own mistress, or I should rather say, being a friendless Englishwoman, thus tormented by a hornet's nest of French princes, dukes, marquises, counts, viscounts, and barons, — ay, and by even the very prefect himself," she added, with a bitter significancy of tone and with a gesture of deep meaning, " I have passed through an ordeal — "

" Ah! then it is because you would not listen to the overtures of all those great personages, but the prefect especially," exclaimed Loftus, now believing the tale and becom-

ing indignant at the outrage thus offered to a lady and a countrywoman, " it is for all this, I presume, that you have been imprisoned here? "

" Such is indeed the truth," answered the lady. " And now can you wonder if, when snatched from my home and brought a prisoner hither three weeks ago, I should in my rage, my fury, and my despair, have made a vow to the effect that never, never again will I reveal my countenance to a being in the form of man! No, never, never," she exclaimed, with a sort of frenzied petulance, " until I encounter some one who shall have learned to love me, not for the beauty of my countenance, or the magnitude of my fortune, but for those gentle, endearing, and more sterling qualities which as a woman I possess. Now, therefore," she added, with the hurried tone of one who was well pleased at having finished a most painful explanation," now, therefore, let us to work, and endeavour to ensure our escape."

" That is, after all, the essential point," said Jocelyn, not thinking it worth while to trouble himself further concerning the eccentric lady's history, as every instant that was lost in the gratification of mere curiosity could only tend to diminish the eventual chances of success. " But tell me — "

" One word! " she interrupted, with a sort of petulant impatience that appeared to be characteristic of her. " We must, at all events, know how to address each other during the short time we remain together. What is your name? "

" Jocelyn Loftus," was the answer.

" And mine is Laura Linden," she immediately rejoined, in a tone so full of ingenuousness and unaffected simplicity that our young hero was angry with himself for having in any way suspected her even for a moment. " Perhaps you have heard of me before? "

" No, never," answered Jocelyn. " But permit me to observe that since your enemies appear to be so very rancorous, and for such unworthy or rather scandalous causes, it will become my duty to propose to you, on our escape hence, such escort and protection as I may be enabled to afford."

" Which I shall accept cheerfully and thankfully back to England," replied Laura. " And now let us apply ourselves earnestly and vigorously to work."

"But have you already any settled plan which you are pursuing, Miss Linden?" inquired Loftus.

"I have ascertained the whole geography of the immense range of buildings which constitute the prefecture," replied the lady. "The old charwoman, yielding to heavy bribes and to the still more munificent promises which I made her, has been won over to my interests. It was she who supplied me with such implements as I required, and she also described to me the situation of every part of the entire structure. There is not a room, nor a corridor, nor a courtyard, the topography of which remains unknown to me. This knowledge made me aware that if I succeeded in escaping from the windows of my own room, I should have to descend into a courtyard where detection and arrest would be inevitable. I therefore resolved — on learning that my neighbour (I mean yourself) was an Englishman — to penetrate into this room and achieve my flight by means of one of those casements. There is no sentinel in the court below. I know all its outlets, and with a courageous spirit to succour us, we may be free long ere the first ray of dawn shall glimmer in the eastern horizon."

"I presume," said Loftus, glancing upon the various articles laid upon the table, "that we are to file away the bars of the window, descend by the silken ladder into the courtyard, and make use of those skeleton keys for any door that may bar our progress?"

"Such is the course which I propose," answered Laura.

"But this bottle of yellow fluid?" said Jocelyn, inquiringly.

"It is nitric acid to moisten the iron bars, and render the filing of them more easy. But quick! quick!" she again cried, with petulant impatience; "let us to work!"

"It is now half an hour past midnight," observed Loftus, consulting his watch; "let us see if we have sufficient time before us to execute all that is to be done."

Thus speaking, he gently and noiselessly opened one of the casements; and holding a candle close to the bars, he examined them attentively.

"Yes, Miss Linden," he observed, "I will undertake to remove a couple of those bars in two hours, — an hour for each. Then, judging from your ideas of the topography of the place, shall we have sufficient time to accomplish all that may afterward remain to be done ere daylight?"

" Yes, undoubtedly," answered Laura, with all the nervous trepidation of a captive impatient to be free.

But scarcely was this rapid colloquy interchanged when a gruff voice, coming from the courtyard below, exclaimed in French, " Shut that window up there, and put out the lights directly," and at the same time the rattling of a bunch of keys was heard.

" Good heavens! " murmured the lady, clasping her hands as if in despair; " it is the watchman going his rounds who has thus observed us! "

" And now," said Loftus, in a tone of bitter disappointment, " we must look upon all our hopes as annihilated."

" Not so, not so," ejaculated Laura, as if suddenly inspired with new courage; " but we must assuredly abandon our project for this night, and in the morning I will ascertain from the old charwoman the precise hours at which that watchman goes his rounds. We can then conduct our operations accordingly to-morrow night."

" Be it so," said Loftus, well pleased to observe that Miss Linden, who evidently knew far more concerning the arrangements of the prefecture than he did, was not disposed to resign herself to despair.

" Now then, Number 15 there! are you going to put out those lights? " exclaimed the gruff voice of the watchman from the courtyard below; and again did he clank his keys, as if backing his words by the sounds of the emblems of authority.

" My good friend," said Jocelyn, approaching the casement, which still remained open, " this is the first time that ever I have been ordered to extinguish my candles — "

" But if you have been allowed to keep them burning, it was only through an indulgence, and not as a right," interrupted the watchman, doggedly.

" Is it because you observed the window open that you now seek to curtail that indulgence? " asked Loftus, in as mild and as conciliatory a tone as he could possibly adopt.

" Well, I must say that it does look rather suspicious," returned the watchman, curtly; " and therefore, if you want to avoid being reported to the prefect in the morning, you will at once do as I bid you, by shutting that window and putting out those lights."

" For Heaven's sake, keep not the man in parley, Mr.

Loftus!" murmured Miss Linden, from the corner of the room into which she had shrunk. "He will suspect something, and all our hopes will be ruined."

"Good night, my friend," said Loftus, speaking from the casement to the watchman below. "Your wishes shall immediately be complied with," and having closed the window, he blew out the candles.

The room was now suddenly plunged into total darkness; and the reader will not require to be informed that Jocelyn was placed in a very singular and awkward predicament. There he was alone — in the utter obscurity and in the depth of the night — in a bedchamber with a young and no doubt beautiful woman, a situation in which most men would have envied him. But his own high principles of honour and integrity, his fidelity toward Louisa Stanley, amounting positively to a devotion and a worship, and likewise the generous and manly considerations which he experienced on behalf of a young, eccentric, but heroic being whom circumstances had thus so suddenly thrown in his way, all these combined at once to raise him, as it were, above the embarrassment of his position and render him superior to its awkwardness, perplexity, and bewilderment.

"Miss Linden," he said, almost immediately, "I am far more distressed on your account than on my own that this enterprise should have experienced so sudden a check, after all the anxiety, toil, and fatigue which you have undergone."

"Oh, that is nothing — nothing, Mr. Loftus," she said, "provided success will smile upon the undertaking tomorrow night."

As she thus spoke our hero could judge by the sound of her voice, the slight rustling of her silk dress, and the gentle tread of her footsteps, that she was approaching toward him; and in a few moments he felt a hand laid gently upon his arm.

"You are endowed with an extraordinary courage," he observed, by way of response to her last observation.

"Yes, it is indomitable, so long as it is sustained by the excitement of the enterprise," answered Laura; "but a reaction soon comes on, and then, alas! I melt into all a woman's weakness. Guide me to a seat, Mr. Loftus, for a sudden faintness is coming over me," she murmured, in a tone of tremulous entreaty; and at the same time she clung

to our hero with her warm naked arms, as if to prevent herself from falling.

Jocelyn hastened to conduct her to the chair which he knew to be nearest; and she sank upon it like one overcome by physical and mental exhaustion.

"This veil suffocates me," she said, with that petulance which appeared the characteristic of her disposition. "Thank Heaven a pitchy darkness prevails at this moment, so that I can take it off and breathe fresh air!" Then, by the sound which met his ears, Jocelyn knew that she was removing the veil from her head. "Now give me a glass of water, Mr. Loftus," she said, after a few moments' pause.

He felt his way to a shelf on which a decanter and glasses stood; and filling a tumbler with water, he returned to where the lady was seated.

"Place the glass to my lips," she said, in a faint and dying tone, so that Loftus became very seriously alarmed lest she should swoon outright.

He hastened to comply with her request, and by raising the tumbler to her lips, enabled her thus to imbibe the cooling beverage.

"Enough, enough," she murmured, in a voice that was now scarcely audible; and her head drooped completely against Jocelyn's breast, as he stood close by the chair in which she was seated.

"Heavens! what can I do for you, Miss Linden?" he inquired, now truly perplexed and most cruelly bewildered.

"Nothing, nothing; I shall be better presently," she said, still very faintly, but somewhat more audibly than before. "It is a passing indisposition; let me repose for a few minutes upon your couch, and then I shall be so far restored as to be enabled to creep back into my own room."

As she thus spoke, she clung to Joselyn in such a manner that he was compelled to raise her in his arms, and sustain her — indeed, we might almost say carry her — toward the couch. But these attentions he bestowed upon her with as much tender delicacy as a brother would exhibit toward a well-beloved sister; and it might have also been with that sisterly reliance on her part which present circumstances were so well calculated to inspire, — it might have been, we say, in that same artless, ingenuous, and unsophisticated spirit that Laura Linden herself clung so tenaciously to our

hero. At all events, full certain was it that her round plump arms encircled his neck, her full and well-developed bust was in the closest contact with his chest, her head lay droopingly upon his shoulder, and her whole form was yielded up, as it were, in the utter abandonment of exhaustion and faintness, as a sleeping child is borne in the arms of a father. He felt her warm cheek against his own, her fragrant breath fanning his face, her silky tresses commingling with his own hair; and as she heaved quick, short gaspings, like half-suffocated sobs, the firm bosom palpitated with rapid undulations against his breast. Thus, had there been aught of grossness or impurity in his imagination, he must have yielded to such exquisite temptations; for assuredly that position was seductive enough to melt the stoicism of an anchorite or vanquish the virtue of an angel.

Gently depositing Laura Linden upon the couch, Jocelyn inwardly hoped, by everything solemn and sacred, that she would not fall off into a complete swoon, but would speedily recover. He remained standing by the couch, in that same brotherly spirit of readiness to minister any attention that might be required; nor could he very well have retreated, even had he been so disposed, for the lady, apparently with the nervous tenacity of one whose ideas are thrown into confusion, had caught hold of his hands and retained them clasped in her own.

" Do you feel better, Miss Linden? " asked Jocelyn.

" Yes, much better, I thank you," she responded, pressing his hands as if in gratitude to her bosom. " You have been kind, very kind to me," she murmured, in a tremulous tone; " no brother could have been kinder or more affectionate," and she imprinted a kiss upon the hand which was nearest to her lips at the moment.

Jocelyn started perceptibly at what seemed to him an uncalled-for manifestation of a too tender gratitude; and the next moment Laura suddenly abandoned the hold which she had upon his hands, exclaiming, " I feel so much better now that I will return into my own room. But you must assist me to pass through the aperture," she added, with that musical vibration of tone, which showed that she was smiling at the idea.

Rising slowly from the couch and in a manner which seemed to indicate that she was still weak and feeble, Miss

Linden felt her way toward the opening in the wall, Jocelyn following close behind her. After three or four vain and ineffectual endeavours to pass her form through the aperture, she said, in a voice apparently trembling with alarm, "Good heavens! I cannot possibly accomplish my purpose! You remember that you had to drag me through into your own room, and therefore I cannot pass back into my chamber unless similarly assisted by some one there. What is to be done?" she demanded, impatiently.

"Compose yourself, Miss Linden, and try once more," responded Loftus. "It is absolutely necessary that you should get back without delay, to remove all traces of our proceedings; otherwise the prefect's livery servant, when he visits our rooms in the morning —"

"Oh, yes, the chances of detection have now become fearful," interrupted Laura, clinging as if in despair to our young hero. "But it is no use for me to try and pass through that aperture; I can not; it hurts me, it lacerates my flesh."

"Then what in Heaven's name shall we do?" asked Jocelyn, more cruelly bewildered and perplexed than ever.

"There is no alternative, I fear," replied the lady, in a tone that suddenly became solemnly serious, for the predicament in which she was placed indeed seemed but too well calculated to shock the feelings of a modest damsel. "There is only one alternative, I say," she repeated, "and that is to await as patiently as we can until the first dawn of morning shall afford us a glimmer of light by which we may enlarge the aperture. This will not take long to do, and will still leave ample time ere the coming of our gaoler to replace all the masonry and woodwork, and thus remove every trace of our proceedings. I fear, Mr. Loftus, that there is no other alternative than the course I have pointed out."

"It indeed appears so," observed Jocelyn, in a tone which expressed all the cruel embarrassment which he so keenly felt.

Our young hero and the beauteous Laura Linden therefore found themselves doomed to remain together for several hours in the darkness of the chamber and surrounded by all the temptations of this strange predicament.

CHAPTER XVIII

LORD AND LADY SACKVILLE

Leaving Jocelyn Loftus and his eccentric companion for awhile in the prison-chamber at the prefecture of police, we must now return to the English capital.

In a magnificently furnished saloon at Carlton House, and between ten and eleven at night, Lord and Lady Sackville were seated together upon a sofa. Nothing could exceed the splendour by which they were surrounded; and if everything that was luxurious, gorgeous, and superb could render existence supremely blest, then must this young and handsome pair have been preëminently happy.

The gilded furniture, the rich draperies, the thick carpets, the ornaments of rarest porcelain, the tables covered with all those fashionable trinkets, trifles, and knickknacks which, though mere useless nothings, are nevertheless so preëminently costly, — all these features, phases, and evidences of consummate splendour and refined luxury characterized the new abode of Lord and Lady Sackville. Indeed, one of the handsomest suites of apartments in the prince regent's palace had thus been assigned to them; and yet, although they were the envy and admiration of the entire fashionable world, we now find them seated mournfully together in that splendid saloon.

Nevertheless, Venetia looked transcendently lovely in the gorgeous dress that she wore; and her husband, as he gazed upon her, might well have been proud of possessing such a wife. On the other hand, never had Horace himself seemed more truly handsome, and any wife might have been proud of such a husband. Besides, was not their name gilded with a title? Did not the glory of a patrician coronet encircle their brow? Had not a pension of three thousand a

year been conferred upon the newly created peer, in order, as the cant phrase goes, " that he might be enabled to support his rank." Had he not an additional income arising from the office of lord steward in the regent's household, and did not the tables in that very saloon groan beneath the evidences of the lavish profusion with which the prince showered down the choicest gifts upon Venetia? Wherefore, then, was this noble couple a prey to melancholy? Wherefore had a cloud settled upon their countenances? Had they not all that honour, wealth, splendour, and distinction could contribute or combine to ensure their felicity? Were they not the idols of the fashionable world? Was not Horace courted, flattered, and smiled upon by the proudest dukes and haughtiest earls? And did not the stateliest duchesses and the most exclusive countesses regard Venetia as a being second only to a queen? In a word, was not Lady Sackville caressed and fawned upon by the whole British aristocracy because she was the mistress of the prince regent? And was not Lord Sackville similarly courted because he was the husband of that royal harlot?

Yes, it was precisely because Venetia was thus the mistress of the prince, and it was because her husband was the pander to her shame, — for these reasons was it they were mournful now. This was almost the first time they had found themselves alone together since the whirl of pleasure, gaiety, and fashionable dissipation had commenced immediately after Venetia surrendered herself to the arms of the prince. But on this particular occasion his Royal Highness was engaged with the Ministers; and it happened that Lord and Lady Sackville were invited to no fashionable reunion for the evening, nor had they company in their own apartments. The consequence was that when the royal dinner-party had broken up, Horace and Venetia found themselves thus alone, — thus, as it were, compelled to look each other in the face despite the feelings of shame that were struggling in their hearts. For be it understood that they were not yet so inured to depravity nor so thoroughly steeped in profligacy as to have become altogether callous to the whispering of the soul's innermost voices and the influence of the heart's better feelings.

" Venetia, my dearest wife," said Horace, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips, " tell me, are you happy? "

"Nay, answer me the same question first," said Venetia, looking in his face for a moment, then colouring deeply, and casting down her beauteous eyes, as if the lids were oppressed with a weight of shame.

"Did we not agree," asked Lord Sackville, "on that memorable night, or rather, morning, when you returned to Acacia Cottage from Carlton House — "

"Oh, allude not thus particularly to that night," said Venetia, with a strong shudder which swept visibly over her entire form, as a rapid breeze appears to bear a sudden ruffle along the surface of the lake.

"Pardon me, my love, for being too explicit," exclaimed Horace, noticing that cold tremor; "but I was merely desirous of reminding you of a special occasion on which we agreed that we would make ourselves happy in spite of all circumstances."

"Yes, I remember full well," returned Venetia; "and Heaven knows that I have endeavoured to make myself, and also to make you, as happy as possible. But — "

"But what? " ejaculated Horace, starting from the sofa, and speaking with the nervous abruptness of a man who is irresistibly impelled to court explanations which he nevertheless dreads to hear.

"Sit down, Horace, sit down," said Venetia, "and I will tell you what I mean."

But instead of resuming his place by her side on the sofa, he seated himself upon a footstool, pillowed his head upon her lap, and said, "Now speak frankly, Venetia, and tell me all that you have to impart."

"Ah! this position which you have taken, this attitude which you have assumed, here, sitting at my feet," exclaimed Venetia, powerfully moved and profoundly touched, "reminds me of the days of our honeymoon, that honeymoon which was so short, yes, short but beatific like a glimpse of Paradise. Then we were all love, all confidence, all childish playfulness; we could look each other in the face, only to smile, and not to blush. But now — now, how altered is it all, what a change has come over us! By rising to an elevation which makes us envied, flattered, fawned upon, we have been made to loathe, detest, and abhor ourselves. Oh, may God grant that we shall not end by loathing, detesting, and abhorring each other! "

"Heavens, Venetia! to hear thee talk thus," exclaimed Lord Sackville, "drives me mad. Why, even within a few hours after what may be termed your fall, yes, even the very next morning, we could look each other in the face without blushing. But now it seems as if the pangs of remorse and the poignancy of shame have sprung into keen vitality again, as if memory, instead of being blunted with the lapse of days and weeks, is actually becoming sharpened, as if pleasure could not drown that memory in its roseate floods, as if luxury could not lull our recollections into repose, and as if honours, riches, adulation, and rank could not appease us for what we have done."

"Oh, look up at me, Horace, look up," exclaimed Venetia, in the melting harmony of that delicious voice which penetrated like a strain of celestial music into the soul; "look up to me a moment, my beloved husband. Let us forget what we are, let us forget what has passed, let us forget also what is to come, and think only of this present moment. For we are here alone together; and oh, let us concentrate our thoughts into a dream, if it may not be a reality of bliss! Let us indulge in an embrace as warm, as tender, and as affectionate as those in which we were wont to steep our senses ere the date of what you just now so truthfully denominated my fall!"

"Yes, oh, yes, let us embrace thus," cried Horace, suddenly inspired with all the enthusiasm of adoration and devotion for his young and beauteous wife; then, as he knelt at her feet, he gazed up passionately into her glowing countenance, while she looked down with equal tenderness upon him; and then their lips met in a kiss more delicious than any in which those lips had joined since the memorable date of Venetia's fall.

But now as Horace, resuming his place upon the footstool, gazed up at his wife, now that he surveyed her with a fondness as fervid and as impassioned as ever he was wont to display previous to that night of her degradation and her shame, he could not help feeling rejoiced at possessing a woman of such transcending beauty, even though he was compelled to abandon her at times to the arms of another. But as his eyes slowly travelled over her entire person, commencing with that superb auburn hair which lay upon her brow like dark gold on alabaster, then lingering on that

countenance every feature of which was so faultless in its chiselling and so classic in its style of beauty, those eyes of such tender melting blue that not even the hyacinth on India's fields could compare therewith, those lips of such delicious redness and dewy moisture, ever remaining the least thing apart so as not only to give a softly sensuous expression to the countenance, but also to afford a glimpse of teeth whiter than the pearls of the East; then, continuing this survey, to trace the swanlike curvature of that snowy neck, the voluptuous fulness of those sloping and softly rounded shoulders, the grandeur of that bust which swelled into a luxuriance more ample than sculptural richness ever set forth, rising like hemispheres of polished alabaster in their well-divided contours, yet with that hue of life wherein the marble can never rival the living form, and appearing to the look full of glowing ardour, warmth, and passion; then, still proceeding with the survey, to mark the wasplike symmetry of the waist, and the robust proportions of the naked arms, so admirably rounded, so polished, and so white; then, with descending look, to gather from the folds of the drapery an outline or shadowing forth of the splendid symmetry of all the lower limbs, and to finish the survey with a view of the well-rounded but slender ankle, and of the long shapely foot resting on the very ottoman where he sat, — oh, thus to wander over the beauties of that woman and linger on all her charms in detail from head to foot, was it not indeed sufficient to crown the happiness of any man, to know that this transcendent being was his own?

"Now I feel happy once more, — as happy as I was wont to be," said Horace, taking his wife's hands in both his own and playing with the long tapering fingers so beautifully crowned with the arching nails of pellucid rosiness. "Thou art indeed wondrously beautiful, my Venetia; and I am rejoiced that, amidst the whirl of pleasure and dissipation, we have at length found an hour's leisure to be alone with each other thus."

"Yes, I love thee, my Horace — O God! I love thee," exclaimed Venetia, suddenly throwing her arms around his neck as if with the impulse of frenzied violence; then as a strong shudder again swept through her form, she cried, almost with accents of despair, "Ah! would to God that

I never more should be clasped in any arms but thine own!"

"Now tell me what you mean, Venetia," said Horace. "Come, let there be confidence between us. I see that something is dwelling in your mind, and it will ease thee to disburden thyself to the ears of thy husband."

"Listen, then, my beloved Horace, and I will tell thee," said Venetia, in a low and stifling tone, as if her very thoughts were choking her ere she gave utterance to them. "But there, pillow thy head upon my bosom, with thy face downward, so that I may not meet thy looks while I proceed to unveil the secret cause that makes me shudder. It is," she continued, in a low, deep, almost hollow tone, as if her voice had suddenly lost its wonted harmony, "it is that I loathe, hate, and abhor that prince to whom I have been sold, — or, rather, to whom I have sold myself; it is that I detest the hypocrisy which compels me to smile upon him, to appear to receive his caresses joyfully, and to be compelled to lavish upon him the tenderest caresses in return. But worse, worse than all that," added Venetia, bending down her head so that her lips touched her husband's ear as his own head reposed upon her bosom; then, in words that seemed to hiss as if coming from the mouth of a snake, she whispered, "it is, Horace, that I would sooner submit to the hideous pawings of an imp than to the loathsome embraces of that filthy sensualist."

Horace started up, with a violent sob suddenly bursting from his breast; and beginning to pace the room in a manner fearfully excited, he exclaimed, "O horror! that my own wife should be doomed to make such a revelation as this to my ears! Oh, that one whom I have loved so fondly, madly, devotedly, and whom I still love so well, should be consigned to so hellish a fate, so damnable a destiny! But it is all my fault — my fault," he repeated, striking his breast forcibly. "It was I who could have saved her while she was as yet far off from the precipice; it was I who could have rescued her at the moment she was trembling above it. But, no, base villain that I was! I suffered her to fall."

"Reproach not yourself, my dearest husband," murmured the well-known voice which had now regained all its wonted sweetness and characteristic melody, and at the same instant a beauteous white hand was laid upon his

shoulder. "It is not your fault. I was foredoomed and predestined even before you and I first met. You know it — you know it, Horace," repeated Lady Sackville; "and long before you agreed to marry me you were aware how inextricably I was entangled, by what solemn vows I was engaged, by what pledges I was bound, and under what influences I was controlled. You knew that all the appearances of ease, comfort, and wealth which surrounded me at Acacia Cottage could have been swept away in a moment had I dared deviate from the path which had been chalked out for me to pursue. You were likewise aware that Mrs. Arbuthnot herself was a spy upon my actions, reporting every look, word, and deed of mine to the supreme authority in Stratton Street. Such was my condition before my marriage with you; and since — "

"Ah! since!" ejaculated Horace, with passionate vehemence; "it is that that goads me to desperation. For when once you were my wife, I could have rescued you from those trammels which had previously enthralled you; I might have turned around upon those who had thus enmeshed you in their toils; I could have said, 'This lady is my wife, and shall not be the slave of your intrigues.' All this could I have done, and you would have been saved, and we might still be enabled to look each other in the face without blushing at the thought of that crowning degradation to which you, my unfortunate wife, have been doomed to submit."

"Not so, not so, Horace," said Venetia, now evidently taking upon herself the task of consoling, reassuring, and tranquillizing her husband; "for had we dared, when our hands were joined in matrimony, to rise up boldly against the authority which I had previously sworn to obey, — that very authority, too, which assented to our union only on express and positive conditions, — all the past would have been pitilessly and remorselessly made public in order to stamp me with the reputation of an adventuress."

"They could not have done it — they dared not!" cried Horace, stamping his foot with indignation. "There was no ground for it; you were no adventuress. If you were, 'twas by others you were made so."

"Ah!" said Venetia, with a peculiar look, "you forget into whose hands I fell, and who first introduced me — "

"Enough, enough of all this," ejaculated Horace, suddenly. "I see that you are right; we could not have acted otherwise than we have done. And, after all," he added, abruptly, "we are fools to make ourselves miserable. I am Lord Sackville, you are Lady Sackville; I am a peer of the realm, you are a peeress; we possess titles and pensions which cannot be taken away from us. Our fortunes are therefore made for life; and it is now our bounden duty to endeavour to enjoy that life as well as we are able."

"Yes, we must make up our minds to adopt this course," said Venetia. "And indeed," she cried, with a sudden access of that callous, selfish, heartless feeling which makes the thorough woman of the world, "we possess all the realities and substantials, the essentials and the materials, to make existence thoroughly happy. It will therefore be our own faults if we allow sentiment and feeling to interfere with that happiness."

"Yes," observed Horace, readily arming himself with the buckler of that cold selfishness which Venetia had just assumed; "it will only be a false feeling and a maudlin sentimentalism that can be allowed to interfere with the realities of our happiness. Let us then agree, solemnly agree," continued Horace, "never more to talk softness and tenderness to each other, but to look, speak, and act as the thorough man and woman of the world."

"Yes, cheerfully do I subscribe to that agreement," responded Venetia.

"Then henceforth our very love shall cease to be a sentiment," continued Horace, "and shall merely be a sensualism. We will have no jealousies, piques, vexations — "

"No boyish and girlish dalliance and romance," added Venetia; "no poetry of the feelings — "

"Nought save passions, cravings, and impulses that become men and women of the world," exclaimed Horace. "And now, my beautiful wife, — as thou art indeed more ravishingly beautiful than ever this evening, especially with that rich glow upon thy cheeks, — let us retire to our own chamber that in each other's arms we may taste the joys of paradise."

With the wanton glow deepening upon her countenance, and with a soft and sensuous lustre stealing into her swimming eyes, Venetia was extending her hand toward her

husband, when the door suddenly opened, and the prince regent burst somewhat unceremoniously into the room.

"My dear Horace, my dear Venetia," he said, tapping the former familiarly upon the back, but at once flinging his arm around the waist of the latter, "I thought I should have been kept up by the Ministers till two or three o'clock this morning. Fortunately, however, I have got rid of them, and now I am my own master once again."

Thus speaking, he gave a significant nod to Lord Sackville, who was compelled to obey it by at once leaving the room. But as he turned away to seek the door, the colour came and went upon his cheeks in such rapid transitions, and he bit his ashy lip so violently, that the poignancy of his emotions may be better conceived than described.

Venetia remained in the gorgeous saloon with the prince, while her husband, not only baffled in the anticipation of enjoying the company of his own wife that night, but also compelled to sneak like a vile cur away, retired to his solitary chamber. There he was compelled to gloat upon his titles and his honours, in order to soothe the sense of shame and degradation that rankled so bitterly in his mind.

Whatever annoyance Venetia might have felt at being thus forced to yield to the whims and minister to the fantasies of his Royal Highness, she nevertheless most artfully and successfully veiled her emotions beneath a smiling aspect.

"Do you know, my angel," said the prince, who had evidently been drinking with tolerable freedom, and whose vinous breath was most sickly and nauseating to Venetia as he bestowed hot kisses upon her countenance, "do you know," he said, "that those cursed Ministers, by coming so suddenly and so unseasonably to pester me on state affairs, deprived me of a little pastime which certain young ladies had contemplated for my diversion? However, it is not yet too late," he exclaimed, starting to his feet, "and if you choose, you shall be a spectatress, though an unseen one, of the amusement."

"Of what nature is this pastime?" inquired Venetia, eagerly catching at anything that seemed calculated to release her from the loathsome caresses which the prince was now lavishing upon her.

"Come and see," he replied; and giving her his arm,

he conducted her across the principal landing, down a long passage, into an antechamber, at the extremity of which was a glass door communicating with another apartment.

"Remain here, my love," said the prince; "but if the fantasy should seize you to come and join our sport, pray do so without ceremony."

Having thus spoken, and bestowing another parting caress upon Venetia, the prince hastened by the glass door into the adjoining apartment.

Lady Sackville now approached this glass door, and peeping between the crimson blinds in such a way that she could see everything without being seen herself, she plunged her looks into the interior of the magnificent saloon which his Royal Highness had just entered. For magnificent it indeed was, furnished in the most luxurious style, and flooded with the light poured forth by numerous chandeliers and lamps. But what chiefly interested Venetia was the circumstance that five or six young ladies, all of whom she recognized as belonging to the proudest families of the aristocracy, had gathered around the prince, and were assailing him with all the artillery alike of their charms and their wit. Venetia was not jealous at the position in which her royal lover was thus placed. She loathed and detested him too cordially to experience a sentiment which, though in itself a noxious weed, yet can only flourish when moistened by the dews of love; and she likewise despised and contemned him more than ever for having brought her to behold the present spectacle.

"He believes me to be utterly and thoroughly depraved," she thought within herself, "and that I take delight in all kinds of profligacy. Well, perhaps the time may come when I shall do so. At all events, henceforth I shall never hesitate to follow my own inclinations, and gratify any caprices that may take possession of me; for I perceive full well that virtue is a mockery, delicacy a laughing-stock, and propriety an imaginery thing, within the precincts of a court."

Venetia was thus musing to herself, when she became aware of footsteps behind her. She turned abruptly around, and beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

Now, it will be remembered that the baronet, when availing himself of his turn to prosecute the love-campaign

against Venetia (then Miss Trelawney), had proposed marriage to the lady; and though she had declined the proposal with a considerable amount of raillery and smart repartee, they had parted most excellent friends. It is true that Venetia was fully aware of Huntingdon's having employed Captain Tash to watch her movements; but as she had subsequently derived a positive and considerable advantage (in the Malpas affair) from that circumstance, she was by no means inclined to cherish it as a grudge against the baronet. Moreover, she did not forget that he had been one of the first to congratulate her at St. George's Church upon her marriage. Altogether she rather liked him, for he was excessively good-tempered, and we have already said that he was of handsome though dissipated appearance; but then it was that pale and interesting aspect of dissipation which is not without its admirers amongst ladies in the fashionable walks of life.

From these observations the reader will not be surprised to learn that Venetia extended her hand in a most friendly manner and smiled very graciously as she thus found herself face to face with the baronet.

"Ah! Lady Sackville," he exclaimed, evidently astonished to meet her in that anteroom. "It is always a pleasure to encounter you anywhere; but may I ask what on earth your ladyship is doing here?"

"The prince, with that exquisite taste which so often characterizes him," replied Venetia, an expression of peculiar contempt curling her lovely lip, "brought me hither to behold some drama in which he is doubtless to perform the principal part."

"It was precisely to take a share in this said drama," observed the baronet, "that the prince invited me hither also. It is true that I am somewhat behind time; but I cannot regret a delay which has produced me the pleasure of meeting your ladyship."

"You know," said Venetia, in a tone of good-humoured raillery, "that I always take compliments for precisely what they are worth."

"If the syllables which fall from my lips were diamonds," answered Sir Douglas Huntingdon, "they would still be of infinitely too poor a value to form a sentence that should adequately proclaim your praise."

"That is assuredly the most costly flattery that has ever yet been offered up to me," observed Lady Sackville, with one of her sweetest smiles. "But are you not going to enter the room where your presence is doubtless wanted?"

"I would much rather remain here, if your ladyship would permit me," replied the baronet, his looks settling upon her with an admiration which though fervid was full of respect.

"I cannot possibly refuse such agreeable conpanionship," answered Venetia; and suffering her eyes to linger upon him for a moment, she gave him, as it were, that coquettish kind of encouragement which may in reality mean nothing, but which an enthusiastic admirer is sure to interpret far otherwise.

"But will you remain here?" asked the baronet, glancing toward the door leading into the saloon.

"Most assuredly," returned Venetia. "I am anxious to behold this drama in which you were to perform a part; and there can certainly be no harm in my contemplating the scene, inasmuch as I recognize five or six young ladies of the highest rank about to join in the diversions."

While thus speaking, Lady Sackville stooped slightly down, and peeped between the blinds. Sir Douglas Huntingdon followed her example, and their heads thus came in gentle contact. The baronet was not likely to withdraw from so pleasant a vicinage, and Lady Sackville did not. Their heads thus remained touching each other, their hair mingling; and in this position did they contemplate what was passing within the gorgeously furnished and brilliantly lighted saloon.

The young ladies of aristocratic birth were clad in the light and gauzy apparel of figurantes, with their hair tastefully arranged, so that it appeared as if their forms were arrayed and their toilet chosen with a view to produce a dramatic effect. Very beautiful indeed were these young ladies; but it was evident from their burning looks and wanton attitudes that modesty with them was but a garment of convenience.

A strain of music stole softly through the room, issuing from a piano the position of which was unseen by Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon at the glass door; and now the aristocratic young ladies timed their graceful

steps to that delicious harmony. Taking from a sideboard several garlands and wreaths of artificial flowers, they raised them with their bare arms above their heads, playing with them, as it were, in a manner that enabled them to show off the beauties of their forms in attitudes more classically graceful, more studiously indelicate, than the most reckless ballet-dancer or figurante of the present day. Then suddenly quickening their pace, they whirled around and around the prince, flinging the garlands and the posies at him, endeavouring to trip him up with the wreaths, and finally making him the butt of a variety of practical jokes, more calculated, however, to excite than to hurt him.

On his side, the prince regent amused himself in several ways. Sometimes he raced and chased after the young ladies, at others he threw himself panting and puffing upon a sofa, one of the aristocratic beauties acting the part of Hebe and bringing him a delicious beverage in a crystal cup. Or else he would suddenly assume a thoughtful and sentimental demeanour, — either taking a seat at a distance, or else leaning pensively against a pillar, — so as to entice the ladies toward him; and then, as they gathered around him again, he would abruptly seize hold of the nearest, fling his arms about her, and cover her with kisses, amidst the pealing laughter and delighted cries of all the rest.

For upwards of ten minutes did Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon continue peeping through the blinds, their heads still remaining in that contact which we have before noticed. The spectacle within the saloon was, of a surety, sufficient to inflame their imaginations, and it certainly produced this effect. Moreover, on the one hand, Sir Douglas Huntingdon was in such an attitude that by casting down his eyes he could plunge his looks amidst the treasures of Venetia's glowing bust; and on the other hand, the lady herself, by casting an occasional sidelong glance at her companion's profile, was led to the reflection that he was really much handsomer than she had even supposed him to be.

"What think you of that spectacle?" she suddenly exclaimed, raising her head from the blinds, and as her looks met those of the baronet, the colour deepened upon her cheeks.

"I can only say that I regret we have not some artificial

flowers here in this anteroom," replied Sir Douglas, "as your ladyship might in that case condescend to practise the same innocent pastime with me."

"It is a punishment, and not as a jest, that I throw this at thee," exclaimed Venetia, suddenly detaching a bouquet from the corsage of her dress and tossing it toward the baronet.

"Ah! then it is as a revenge, and not as a mere insolent liberty, that I treat your ladyship thus," returned the baronet; and suddenly throwing his arms around Venetia's neck, he pressed his lips to hers.

She received the caress without resentment, certainly, although perhaps she did not exactly return it. But in the look which she flung upon the baronet, as she disengaged herself from his arms, there was something which elevated his hopes to a frenzied height.

"Begone now," she said, hastily. "Let not the prince suppose that you have been lingering here with me."

This very remark at once seemed to place the lady and the baronet upon the most familiar footing, by implying, as it were, that a secret had suddenly sprung into existence between them. Intoxicated with the thought that Venetia, the brilliant, beauteous, incomparable Venetia, would yet bestow her favours upon him, Sir Douglas Huntingdon snatched up her hand, pressed it to his lips, and then hurried from the room.

Almost immediately afterward the prince came forth from the saloon, carefully closing the glass door behind him; and perceiving Venetia's flushed cheeks and palpitating bosom, he attributed her excitement to no other cause than the voluptuous spectacle which he had indeed purposely brought her hither to view in the hope that it would inflame her passions to a maddening height.

"Come with me, adored one," he murmured, as he pressed his mouth to those lips that still bore the imprint of the baronet's far more welcome caress; then fixing upon her a look all burning with desire, the royal voluptuary led his mistress away to his own suite of apartments.

CHAPTER XIX

THE KING'S BENCH

At the period of which we are writing, the authority of the Secretary of State had not invaded the King's Bench Prison with those innovations, encroachments, and changes which have since robbed that establishment of all its peculiar glory. The immense enclosure had not then been divided into different compartments and yards respectively appropriated for the degrees and grades of insolvency and indebtedness; but the Bench was then indeed in its glory, as the cesspool of the West End of London.

Resembling an enormous barrack standing in the midst of spacious grounds, girt by a wall of the same height as the edifice itself, and covered with those revolving iron spikes that are technically termed *chevaux-de-frise*, having also several detached buildings, such as the state house, the coffee-house, and the kitchen, and with the principal portion of the grounds themselves divided into racket-courts, — such was the King's Bench Prison.

But there were many features connected with the place which were celebrated then, have been celebrated until very late years, and still remain doubtless memorable in the minds of thousands and thousands who have passed through the ordeal of captivity there. For instance, there was the strong room, in which obstreperous prisoners were confined, the chapel, where the parson preached to the clerk, and the clerk said " amen " to the parson, for want of a congregation, the little market-place close by the kitchen, and the three pumps which marked the limits of each racket-ground, the central pump being dignified with the name of the Dolphin. Then there was the Tap, where the genuine beverage brewed by Barclay and Perkins found shoals of

customers from morning to night; and at the other extremity of the building, there was another public-room for the sale of beer, and bearing the sign of the Brace. Moreover, in the coffee-house there was an apartment enjoying the aristocratic distinction of the wine-room, although considerably smaller and a trifle less comfortable than the parlour of a fifth-rate pot-house out-of-doors.

These and several other features connected with the Bench are cherished in the memories of thousands and thousands up to the present day; and now, as some old prisoner takes his lonely walk up and down the melancholy parade, he sighs as he recalls to recollection those times when that parade and the adjacent racket-grounds were swarming with life, when the whole scene was rather that of a fair than of a prison, and when the voices of revellers in the Tap, players and bettors at racket, merry fellows shouting from the windows, and itinerant venders of all kinds of comestibles, mingled strangely together and filled the air.

There were, also, until late years, some curious characters within the walls of the King's Bench Prison. First and foremost was a stout, bluff-looking, red-faced man, not unlike a sailor in his build and rolling walk. This was Yorke, the crier, whose avocations consisted in escorting visitors to the rooms of friends whom they came to see, crying things that were lost, or making announcements of festivities that were to take place either at the Tap or the Brace, and performing all kinds of odd jobs for anybody who was able to pay him. Next, as the presiding genius of the Market-place, might be seen a tall, gaunt, scraggy old woman, with a very weather-beaten face and a nose and chin that nearly met, like the profile of old Mother Hubbard in the picture-books. The female of whom we are speaking was known as Old Nanny; and she sold fish, vegetables, and anything else by which she could turn "a decent penny." She generally wore either a man's great-coat or else an old brown cloak; and a black bonnet, as rusty as a japanned coal-scuttle that has been very much neglected, was perched so airly and jauntily on the top of her head that one would really have thought Old Nanny was a coquette in her way.

In a sentry-box at the entrance of the innermost lobby

invariably stood from morning to night a most dreadful-looking old man, with his face twisting itself up into all kinds of malignant, spiteful, and ferocious expressions. He wore upon his head a great fur cap which gave him, when viewed from a considerable distance, a false air of the lord mayor's swordbearer. This nasty-looking veteran prisoner was called Old Sims, and he posted himself in that sentry-box that he might obtain alms from visitors entering the place, to attract whose notice he was wont to shake a few pence in a great tin box with a hole in the top to receive any additional pence which the hand of benevolence might drop in.

Several other remarkable characters were there; and to a newcomer entering the place as a prisoner, as well as to every one having business there as a visitor, were all the above local features and human curiosities duly pointed out. Of the latter species we must not forget to observe that there were several rare specimens in the shape of gentlemen who had been there for ten, twenty, or even thirty years, and who could get out at any moment they chose, but who unaccountably preferred dwelling within those spike-crowned walls.

Such was the King's Bench in the time of which we are writing; and indeed, the description would hold good down to a period of about eight or ten years ago. But, as we have above hinted, the ruthless hand of official authority suddenly annihilated all indulgences and liberties with one fell swoop. Were an equally sweeping reform to be applied to all the great institutions of this country, incalculable advantages would be the speedy result.

On being arrested at the suit of Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker, for the sum of five thousand guineas, Colonel Malpas was borne off to the sponging-house of Mr. Moses Ikey in Fetter Lane. There he remained for nearly three weeks, in the hope of being able to come to a settlement with his creditor; but vainly did he apply to his wife's relations; they sent him no answer. Vainly also did he address himself to some of his fashionable friends. The affair at the banquet and the chastisement he received from Captain Tash had got whispered abroad, and the colonel found himself cut accordingly. The propositions which he made to Mr. Emmerson were likewise treated

with silent contempt; and when he wrote a letter full of penitence to the Countess of Curzon, it was returned to him unopened in a blank envelope, the handwriting of the address having been to her ladyship a sufficient indication from whom the missive came.

Perceiving, therefore, that he had no immediate chances of extricating himself from his difficulties, and finding it too expensive to remain any longer at the establishment of Mr. Moses Ikey, where the meanest and nastiest fare was served up at the dearest and most exorbitant rate, the colonel resolved to move over to the King's Bench. His solicitor accordingly obtained the necessary writ of *habeas corpus;* the colonel and his portmanteau were consigned to a hackney-coach, under the care of a tipstaff; and in due course the aforesaid colonel and portmanteau were deposited in the upper lobby of the far-famed prison. There he was at once called upon to pay a certain amount for gate-fees; and having done this, it was suggested to him that "all gentlemen as called themselves gentlemen were accustomed to behave as sich and treat the turnkeys." To this further drain upon his exchequer the colonel likewise submitted; and he enjoyed the supreme satisfaction of having his health drunk by the three thirsty-looking turnkeys belonging to the upper lobby, and the two hungry and thirsty-looking turnkeys annexed to the lower lobby.

He was now escorted to the coffee-house, where, upon inquiry, he found that he could be accommodated with a bedroom, which bedroom, upon inspection, turned out to be about the same dimensions as an ordinary clothes-press. However, the colonel was compelled to submit to the necessity of the case; and it being now five o'clock in the afternoon, he inquired what he could have for dinner. The reply was "anything he chose to order;" but it subsequently proved that a steak or a chop would come most conveniently within the culinary capabilities of the establishment.

Having accordingly agreed upon the materials for his dinner, the colonel sat down, dolefully and despondingly enough, to read the newspaper in the wine-room. But scarcely had he commenced the perusal of a ponderous leading article on nothing at all, when he was startled by the sudden bursting forth of a stentorian voice just outside

the window. He listened, and heard the following announcement duly and deliberately made:

"Oyes! Oyes! Oyes! This is to give notice that if anybody has found an old pair of black breeches, new seated, which was took from the winder of MacHugh the tailor's room, Number 3 in 10 Staircase, and will bring them to the crier, he shall receive a pot of half-an'-half for his trouble and no questions axed. God save the king!"

Old Yorke — for he it was who gave forth this very interesting and exciting announcement — paused for a few moments, cleared his voice from a little huskiness that had seized upon it through too powerful a vociferation, and then communicated another piece of intelligence to the admiring denizens of the Bench:

"Oyes! Oyes! Oyes! Know ye all whom it may consarn, and take notice, that a Free-and-easy will be held to-night in the Brace, for the benefit of Mr. Peter Sniggles, who had the misfortune to cut his head open by falling dead drunk down No. 10 Staircase. The cheer will be taken by Mr. Joseph Tubbs at eight o'clock precisely, when several comic songs and other wocal harmony will take place. God save the king!"

Old Yorke then passed on from the vicinage of the coffee-house to repeat the announcements in other parts of the building; and the colonel learned from the waiter who brought in his dinner that those announcements were really genuine and seriously meant, and not a mere hoax, as Malpas had at first imagined them to be.

Having partaken of his meal, and while sipping the first glass of an execrable pint of port, the colonel was informed by the waiter that a gentleman wished to speak to him.

"Who is he?" inquired Malpas.

"Well, sir, he's a lawyer as is well known in this here place," answered the waiter, "and does a sight of business for genelmen in difficulties. He whispered to me that he could get you out of quod in three or four days —"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Malpas, his countenance brightening up. "What is his name?"

"Mr. Joshua Jenkins," answered the waiter. "Shall I tell him to walk in?"

"By all means," responded the colonel; "and bring

a clean glass, as perhaps Mr. Jenkins will do me the favour to take some wine with me."

The waiter slid out of the room with a most praiseworthy alacrity, considering that he had to drag with him a pair of shoes down at the heels and a great deal too large for his feet. In a few minutes he returned, escorting a short, seedy-looking individual, with very dirty linen and an unmistakable Jewish countenance. In fact, the personal appearance of this gentleman was by no means such as would have induced a cautious individual to trust him to get change for a five-pound note. The colonel, therefore, surprised and disgusted at this unpromising aspect of the man of business, received him in a somewhat frigid and haughty fashion, just barely inviting him to be seated, but not choosing to take any notice of the circumstance of an extra glass being placed upon the table. Mr. Joshua Jenkins was, however, a gentleman of the free and easy school; and at once drawing a chair close up to the table, he observed, "Well, colonel, so you are lumbered at last!"

"You speak as if you knew me, sir," remarked Malpas, surveying him with undisguised disgust.

"Oh, I know everybody by name about town," replied Mr. Joshua Jenkins, with a cunning leer; "and therefore it was not likely that the fashionable name of Malpas should remain strange to me. In fact, I knew when you was locked up over at Ikey's; and I should have come to see you there, but I thought by your stopping at such a place you was making arrangements to get out. Now, however, that you have come over here, I thought it high time to introduce myself. So here's better luck to you, colonel," added Mr. Jenkins, coolly filling the glass and raising it to his lips; then, with a familiar nod across the table, he tossed off the contents.

"And pray, sir," inquired the colonel, sinking back perfectly aghast at this King's Bench ease and hail-fellow-well-met unceremoniousness, "and pray, sir," he repeated, in his usual drawling tone, "what can you do for me?"

"Get you out of quod," replied Jenkins, with a knowing wink, as he refilled his glass.

"Do you, then, know anybody who is likely to lend me five thousand guineas?" inquired Malpas, surveying the

seedy-looking lawyer with an expression of mingled incredulity and superciliousness.

"Not I indeed," returned Jenkins. "I suppose you would not pay the debt if you could; but would rather get out, snap your fingers at your creditor, run over to France, and make him take a farthing in the pound."

"But is it possible to manage this?" exclaimed Malpas, somewhat staggered by the air of decision which the attorney assumed.

"To be sure it is," was the still more positive response.

"And how?" demanded Malpas, looking and speaking more civilly.

"By bail," rejoined Mr. Jenkins; and he tossed off two glasses of wine in rapid succession.

"Ah! I have heard, by the bye, that something could be done in this way," said Malpas, catching eagerly at the suggestion.

"To be sure it can," continued the attorney. Then, tapping his prominent nose with his very dirty forefinger, and looking what may be termed greasily knowing with his oily countenance, he said, "You are arrested on mesne process; and of course by putting in an appearance and plea you can keep off judgment. Well, then, by appearing to the writ it is as much as to say that you mean to defend the action and go to trial; and by meaning to go to trial, you can put in bail in the interval. This is what is called justifying; and it's easy done now, as the bail would have to go before the judge in chambers."

"But I cannot get any two persons to put bail in for me to such an amount," observed Malpas. "Remember that I am detained here for five thousand guineas."

"Well, and you must have two bail each able to prove himself worth ten thousand," returned Mr. Jenkins.

"Two men worth twenty thousand guineas between them!" ejaculated Malpas, in despair. "I cannot obtain such security."

"But I can," said Mr. Jenkins, slyly and drily.

"You can?" ejaculated Malpas, starting with joy.

"Yes, to be sure," responded Jenkins. "In fact, I brought in with me just now a couple of bail for you to look at; and I think they are just the very thing."

"Good heavens!" cried the colonel, in amazement; "do

you inspect bail in the Bench just as you do horses at Tattersall's? "

"Ay, and a precious sight keener, too, when you want to see whether they will pass muster," said Mr. Jenkins. "So if you like to give me a hundred guineas, — that is to say, forty for each of the bail to put in their pockets, and twenty for myself, — the job shall be done; and in less than a week you shall be out."

"But is it possible," cried the colonel, more and more bewildered, "that any two wealthy gentlemen, worth ten thousand guineas each, can be moved by such a paltry consideration as forty pounds to incur so vast a risk on my account? "

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Jenkins, with a peculiar smile; "the two chaps that I have got along with me here this evening would bail the devil if he would only pay them for it."

"You surprise me! " cried the colonel. "But where are these two immensely rich money-making gentlemen? "

"I left them in the Tap, eating bread and cheese and onions; and I paid for a pot of half-and-half for them to enjoy themselves," coolly answered Mr. Joshua Jenkins.

The colonel started with the sudden indignation of one who thought he was being bantered; but as a sudden idea struck him and the real truth flashed to his comprehension, he said:

"I suppose, then, that these people are what you call straw bail? "

"Just so," replied Mr. Jenkins. "I am astonished you did not twig it all along. Lord bless you, it's as easily done as possible. I'll give you a proof. About a year ago a nobleman owing three thousand pounds was arrested by Simon the money-lender up at the West End. The nobleman's father offered Simon fifteen shillings in the pound; but Simon obstinately refused anything less than the whole. Well, so the nobleman sent for me. I dressed up a tinker and a dog's meat man in fine clothes, paid their rates and taxes for them, took them up before a judge, made them swear they were each worth six thousand pounds, and so justified bail for the young nobleman. He was let out and bolted to Guernsey, where he remained while I made terms with Simon for him. And now, sir, how much do you think that Simon was glad to take, after all? "

"I really can't say," returned Malpas; "perhaps seven and sixpence in the pound?"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Mr. Jenkins. "I made him take five farthings in the pound and stand a bottle of wine into the bargain. So you see how easy these kind of things can be done."

"I do, indeed," replied the colonel. "But is it possible that the judge could be so easily duped?"

"Not he!" exclaimed the attorney. "His lordship knows devilish well that when bail go up to justify for ten thousand pounds, they are not really worth ten pence; he knows, too, that the very clothes they wear at the time are only lent them for the occasion; but he is obliged to take their oaths that they are worth so much, provided the solicitor on the other side can't show the contrary. And we take devilish good care, colonel, that nothing of the kind shall be shown at all. Why, would you believe it, I have had that tinker and that dog's meat man up for bail so often, any time during these last fourteen years, that their faces are as well known to every one of the judges and every one of the judges' clerks as they are to me or to their own wives; and it is really quite amusing to see how solemnly the judge always looks these fellows in the face, as if he had never seen them before in all his life, and how he appears to take in as gospel all they tell him about their immense resources. But I don't always take up the same bail; that would be coming it rather too strong, particularly as there is always something different as to their profession or trade every time they do go up. I have got a dog-fancier, — I might even call him a dog-stealer, without telling a lie, — and he's a capital bail, with the impudence of brass. The week before last he went up, and the judge says, 'Well, sir, what are you?' 'A merchant, my lud,' was the prompt answer; and then he went on to describe of what his merchandise consisted, heaping together more silks, brocades, and costly stuffs than you read of in the Arabian Nights. Well, last week he went up again; and it happened to be the same judge in chambers. 'Now, sir, what are you?' asked the judge, looking for all the world as if he had never seen such a face before. 'I am a farmer and grazier in Scotland, my lud,' was the dog-fancier's instantaneous reply; and he went on to describe the thousand head of cattle that grazed

upon his hills, and the ten thousand sheep that fed upon his pastures. So of course it was all right again. Well, at the beginning of this week I took him up once more; and it happened to be the very selfsame judge as on the two former occasions. 'Now, sir, what are you?' asked his lordship, so polite and civil as if he no more saw through the dodge than the babe unborn. 'I am an Oporto wine-merchant, my lud,' replied the dog-fancier, coolly; and he went on to describe how he had got fifty pipes of port wine in the Channel Islands, ready for the English market, and how he had already refused sixty guineas apiece for them. Of course he was accepted; and so you see, Colonel Malpas, that I am pretty successful in the bail that I take up. In fact, I can give you plenty of references to prove that I am the best straw bail agent in London. And now, with your permission, I'll ring the bell for another pint of wine."

No sooner said than done; the wine was brought, and while Mr. Joshua Jenkins discussed it, the bargain was confirmed relative to the bail by the colonel paying twenty guineas down and agreeing to deposit eighty more in the hands of the master of the coffee-house, to be duly handed over to Mr. Jenkins aforesaid on the bail passing the scrutiny of the judge. Mr. Jenkins then took his leave; and Colonel Malpas remained for a short time alone, to ponder over the singular statements he had heard from the lips of the lawyer.

But in a few minutes the door was suddenly burst open, and five or six individuals, of shabby-genteel appearance, rushed one upon the heels of another into the wine-room. They evidently thought that this noisy and unceremonious mode of entrance was highly diverting, for they laughed boisterously as they flung themselves upon the benches at the table nearest to that where the colonel was sitting.

Almost immediately afterward the waiter made his appearance, saying, "Now, genelmen, give your orders," but in a tone which showed that he did not highly admire his customers.

"Well, what shall it be?" cried one, appealing to his companions.

"Oh, glasses of negus around," said another. "There are six of us. Come, waiter, half a dozen glasses of negus. Look sharp!"

"Oh, yes, sir, I am looking sharp enough," responded the waiter; "but I want to see the money before I serve the lush."

"What cursed infernal impudence!" ejaculated the one who had first spoken. "Who the devil ever thinks of asking a gentleman for money? For my part," he added, "I have left my purse up in my room, which is deuced imprudent, by the bye, seeing it is full of gold and bank-notes."

"And as for my purse," remarked another of the delectable party, fumbling in his pocket, "it has got through a hole down into the linings of my breeches, and I sha'n't be able to fish it up until I take my small-clothes off. It's deuced provoking, for I've got at least five pounds of small change in it, and should have been delighted to stand treat."

"Well, upon my word, we seem to be out of luck," exclaimed the third member of the party, "for I've got nothing but a bank-note for a hundred guineas," he continued, drawing out an old brown silk purse with a playbill rustling in one end; "and there's no chance of getting change for such a heavy piece of flimsy in this place to-night."

"Deuce take it!" cried a fourth; "if I had known that you were all exposed to such inconveniences as these, I would not have lent that twenty guineas just now to Lord Smigsmag. But really it was impossible to refuse his lordship under the circumstances."

"Oh," exclaimed the fifth, "don't make yourselves uneasy. I've got plenty of money about me," and thus speaking, he thrust his hands with all confidence into his breeches' pocket. Then suddenly starting as if alarmed by a chimney falling or a cry of fire, he vociferated, "By heavens! I have lost my purse, I have lost my purse!" and he affected to be in a tremendous rage.

"Now, was there ever anything so regularly unfortunate?" exclaimed the sixth member of this precious group, drawing forth the remains of a cheque-book from which a great number of drafts had been cut out. "Here am I, not only able but also willing to write you a cheque for a cool hundred or two, just as you like; but now it is after business hours in Lombard Street, and so it's all the same as if I had not a twopenny-piece in all the world at my banker's."

"Well, it raly is wery provoking," exclaimed the waiter,

with a covert sarcasm in his tone, " to see six genelmen all so well-to-do in their circumstances and so full of blunt as you are, and not able just at this present speaking to raise six shillings between you all."

" It is provoking — very," said one of the party, looking full at Malpas; " and if I knew anybody who would just lend me as much as six shillings till to-morrow morning, I would send them in to him with my card and a note of thanks just as he sat down to his breakfast."

The colonel, who was too wide-awake not to see through the characters of the six gentlemen, made no remark, and indeed affected not to observe that any hint had been thrown out toward himself.

" Did you speak, sir? " said the foremost of the party, now boldly addressing the colonel, but with a very bland look and polite bow.

" No, sir, I said nothing," replied Malpas, somewhat sulkily.

" There, by heavens! the gentleman is a trump," vociferated the previous speaker. " He offers to treat us to glasses of negus around. Come, waiter, look alive; the gentleman is anxious to pay his footing, and we are anxious to drink his health."

The colonel was so taken aback by the cool impudence of this proceeding that he could not return a negative to the inquiring look which the waiter threw upon him; and this functionary, acting upon the principle that silence gives consent, at once shuffled away to execute the order.

" Newcomer, sir? " said one of the party to the colonel.

" Yes, I am sorry to say so," responded Malpas, not deeming it prudent to treat his fellow prisoners with any marked coolness.

" Going to stay here long? " asked another.

" In for much? " blandly inquired a third.

" Going through the court? " mildly asked a fourth.

" Or going to bail out? " said a fifth.

" If you stay here any time," observed the sixth, " you'll want a room. Now, as there are only about a hundred and twenty rooms in the place, each not large enough to swing a cat in, and seven hundred prisoners to live in them all, it's rather a difficult thing to get a room to oneself at any price. But as you seem to be a regular gentleman and are

standing this negus in so handsome a manner, I shouldn't mind letting you have my room for about a couple of guineas a week."

But before the colonel had leisure to answer a single one of the above questions, or give any reply to the proposal concerning the room, the waiter made his appearance with the negus; and the conversation thereupon seemed to take a new impulse and flow into a variety of other channels.

"Now, my good fellow," said the foremost of the party, addressing himself to the colonel in terms as familiar as if he had known him from childhood, "while drinking your health I must beg of you not to take on too much on account of this imprisonment. Lord bless you! it's nothing when you are accustomed to it. Look at me now."

Colonel Malpas did as he was desired, but could not help thinking that there was nothing very agreeable or pleasant to contemplate in the appearance of a bloated, dissipated, rakish-looking fellow, with long, dry, dirty hair, and linen that seemed to imply that he had forfeited the confidence of his washerwoman.

"Well, you see me?" continued this individual; "and such as you see me, so I am," he added, thus enunciating a self-evident proposition. "I am just twenty-seven years old, and I've been six years in this place. When I came of age I had twenty thousand pounds, all of which I spent in nine months. For three months I played at hide-and-seek; then I got taken and locked up here, and here I've been ever since, and am likely to remain God knows how much longer. That's what I call life;" and he burst out into a fit of uproarious laughter, in which his five companions as boisterously joined.

"Well, I've seen a little of life, too," remarked the second. "When I came of age I had a thousand pounds, and made everybody believe that I had got a fortune of fifty thousand. So I lived in glorious style, got into debt as much as people would let me, kept hunters, race-horses, and hounds, drove my four-in-hand, gave champagne parties, had a town-house, a country-house, a crib down at Newmarket, another at Melton, and a shooting-box in the Highlands, and thus kept up a roaring game for two years. At last the smash came. Everything went to the dogs, and I was brought over here. That was eight years ago, and here I've been ever

since. Now, wasn't that a lark?" he exclaimed, laughing most joyously at this unblushing revelation of his rascality, while his boon companions joined in his mirth.

"Well, I did even better than that," said the third; "for when I came of age I hadn't a blessed farthing in the world. But I bought a precious large pair of whiskers and mustachios in the Burlington Arcade, clapped a long, jingling pair of spurs upon my heels, wore a frogged coat, stuck my hat jauntily over my right ear, and called myself Captain. Thus decorated personally and titularly, I took up my abode at Long's Hotel and lived in the most sumptuous manner. The fashionable jewellers were delighted to supply the Captain with all he wanted in the shape of watches, chains, rings, and so on; and the Captain borrowed their full value on them from that accommodating relative, his uncle. Things went on well enough in this manner for nearly a twelvemonth, and I was on the point of marrying an heiress with a hundred thousand pounds, when the very night before the happy morning, I unfortunately left my pocketbook behind at the house of my intended. Her papa and mamma — like prying old folks as they were — could not resist the curiosity of peeping inside, just to catch a glimpse of the Captain's little secrets, when, lo and behold! to their astonishment and dismay, they found the said pocketbook crammed with pawnbrokers' duplicates. Early next morning, just as I was dressing for my bridal, not having previously missed the pocketbook, nor suspecting the storm which was about to burst over my head, a parcel was put into my hand by the head waiter at Long's. I tore it open, and out dropped the fatal pocketbook, accompanied by a note from my intended's papa, couched in terms which always make me feel very uncomfortable when I think of them. Of course it was all up with the matrimonial scheme; the landlord of Long's arrested me for my bill, I was brought to the Bench, and here I have been vegetating for the last four years. How the devil I shall ever get out, not daring to face all those jewellers in the insolvent's court, I really don't know, nor yet particularly care," and this conclusive observation was the signal for another uproarious burst of laughter.

"Ah! my career was equally short, perhaps not so brilliant, and most assuredly ten thousand times more foolish,"

exclaimed the fourth of this delectable party, when the laughter had again subsided. " On coming of age, I received thirty thousand pounds of my own fortune, and married a young lady who had fifty thousand pounds as her fortune. But within three months after this marriage I was introduced to Madame Profligata, the celebrated actress, and though she is not half so good-looking as my own wife, yet I was fool enough to fancy that it was a very grand thing to have such a woman as my mistress. I accordingly made overtures, and came to an agreement to allow her a house, carriage, and five hundred a year; but the very day after she was installed in her new dwelling, she told me that she could not possibly stir out for want of diamonds. I accordingly sent to the most fashionable jeweller to bring up some sets of brilliants; and I offered madame a present of gems valued at about a thousand guineas. Thereupon she burst out laughing in my face, and told me if I meant to do things in a chandler's shop style we had better cut it at once. I trembled at the idea of being ridiculed before all the world by losing my mistress for such a trifle, and therefore allowed her to select diamonds to the amount of six thousand guineas. To be brief, madame required so many valuables of all descriptions, had so many long-standing debts which must be paid, and went out shopping so incessantly, that in less than three months she positively wheedled me out of twenty thousand pounds. Her extravagance grew more unbounded as she perceived that I was soft and yielding, so that before we had been a year together she had swallowed up not only my own fortune, but also my wife's. And now, speaking of my wife, I may as well state that she returned home to her friends, while I lived altogether with madame. All my ready cash being gone, my insatiate mistress taught me how to raise money upon bills; and strange, almost incredible as it may seem, I negotiated in one year my own acceptances to the tune of eighty thousand guineas, for which all the value that we obtained was about three thousand in money, ten thousand in wine, which nobody could drink, ten thousand in pictures, the veriest of daubs, and all the rest was absorbed in what was called discount and commission. At last, when my name was so regularly worn out that not a discounter would look at it, madame picked a quarrel with me, and we parted. The very next day I heard that she

had picked up another flat whom she took to live with her. As for myself, being immediately arrested on some of the bills falling due, I was brought over to the Bench; and being uncommonly hard up, I pocketed my resentment against madame, and wrote to her to lend me fifty pounds, as I happened to be well aware that she had received five thousand two days before from her new lover. But she laughed in my messenger's face, and told him to go about his business. To conclude, I have been three years in this place, and during that period have beheld the arrival not only of the flat who succeeded me in the favours of Madame Profligata, but also of four others who during the interval have successively been her paramours and her dupes. But never mind," he exclaimed, assuming an air of jollity which was not, after all, quite natural, " we must take things as we find them, and fling care to the dogs! "

" Yes, that's the only maxim to be followed in a place like this," said the fifth individual. " I suppose we have all been very gay and very foolish in our time. For my part, although now only in my twenty-sixth year, I have run through three fortunes, amounting altogether to a hundred and fifty thousand guineas. The first was left me by my grandfather, the second by an uncle, and the third by my father; but I had a mania for aristocratic acquaintances, and what with playing at dice with dukes, at ecarté with earls, at cribbage with counts, and billiards with baronets, I got so completely plucked that I at last found myself here, and not a feather to fly with."

" And I suppose not one of your fine acquaintances has ever been in to see you? " observed the sixth individual. " Ah! that is just like them. Five years ago, on coming of age, I inherited a fortune of fourteen thousand pounds, and a certain fashionable friend honoured me with an introduction to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. His Royal Highness, hearing I had come of age and inherited property which was at my own disposal, was pleased to smile upon me most graciously. The next gracious mark of the princely favour was a very gracious invitation to a select supper at Carlton House, where I was introduced to five or six of his Royal Highness's boon companions. After supper his Royal Highness was most graciously pleased to propose dice; and while playing with me, I could not help noticing

that his Royal Highness was no mean adept at securing a die, — or, in other words, cheating most flagrantly. But who could tell a prince that he was a downright sharper, — especially such a gracious prince as that, who robbed you before your very eyes in a style so well becoming the first gentleman in Europe! As a matter of course I submitted with the best possible grace to be thus graciously fleeced of all I possessed; and after five or six select little suppers at Carlton House, I was as thoroughly cleaned out by that same gracious prince as it was possible for man to be. Finding myself thus agreeably and pleasantly ruined, and calling to mind the numerous promises which his Royal Highness had so graciously made to provide for me, I ventured to call at Carlton House and explain my exact position to that gracious prince. He listened with his wonted suavity of look while I frankly declared how penniless I was and besought him to lose no time in fulfilling his generous intentions by bestowing a situation upon me. 'And so you have got no more money?' his Royal Highness was most graciously pleased to observe. 'Not a farthing, sir,' I answered. 'Then, damn your eyes,' he exclaimed, becoming quite purple in the face, 'what the devil business have you here?' and, turning upon his heel, he rang the bell for me to be shown out. Reduced to despair by this proceeding, and being painfully brought to the conviction that his Royal Highness was the most ungracious prince in the world, I plunged headlong into all kinds of dissipation to drown care. Dissipation led to extravagance, extravagance to debt, and debt to the King's Bench, where I have been for the last four years, and mean to stop because I can manage to pick up a guinea by hook or by crook within these walls, which I should be somewhat puzzled to do outside."

Our readers will not have failed to observe that despite all their previous blusterings, vapourings, and boastings about well-filled purses, lost purses, lent money, cheque-books, and so forth, the half-dozen gentlemen really and truly were reduced to the sad alternative of living upon their wits, even within the walls of a debtors' gaol, where it might be thought that everybody's wits were too sharp to permit the possibility of being lived upon by any save their owners. It will likewise have been observed that when once the half-dozen comrades had induced the colonel to

treat them to the negus, — or, rather, had succeeded in obtaining it in his name, — they very freely put him in possession of the incidents of their past lives. Finally, as their tales and conversation served to while away the colonel's time, he encouraged their garrulity by a fresh supply of negus; and in this manner did the party continue chatting and drinking until eleven o'clock, when the lights were put out in the coffee-room.

Malpas then went up to bed, and the six friends strolled forth " to make the tour of the whistling shops," or, in other words, to visit every room where gin (prohibited by the gaol regulations) was sold on the sly.

CHAPTER XX

A SCENE IN THE DARK

We must now return to Jocelyn Loftus and Laura Linden, whom we left together in the dead of night and in the utter darkness of a chamber at the prefecture of police.

The reader will remember that the young lady declared it to be utterly impossible for her to pass through the opening into her own apartment, and it had been agreed that she was to remain in our hero's chamber until daylight should enable them to enlarge the aperture, for be it recollected that they dared not light the candles again after the peremptory command and undisguised menace of the watchman.

The moment Jocelyn thus found that it was absolutely necessary — or, at least, to all appearances — that Laura should remain until dawn in his apartment, he again rose, as it were, superior to the perplexities of his situation, and in the calm and courteous tone of a gentleman who wishes to show that his aim is to observe the most delicate consideration toward a female companion, he said, "Miss Linden, I pray you to use my couch as a sofa, and I will envelop myself in my cloak and repose in the armchair between the windows."

This observation was significant enough, inasmuch as the position which Loftus thus specified, and to which he at once felt his way in the dark, placed the whole length of the room between himself and Laura Linden. Accordingly, enveloping himself in his mantle, Loftus threw himself in the armchair, and for a few minutes a profound silence reigned in the apartment.

"Is not this a most romantic and singular adventure?" said Laura, at length, in that low, tremulous, and half-plaintive voice which is ofttimes woman's most dangerous

weapon, inasmuch as it steals insidiously into that heart from which the more boldly played artillery of other charms has innocuously rebounded.

"It is one of those incidents which are more frequently encountered in novels than in real life," answered Loftus, sorry in his heart that the previously prevailing silence was thus broken by renewed discourse; and at the same time it struck him that the young lady's voice had undergone some slight change since she had last spoken. Indeed, a vague and undefined suspicion stole gradually into the breast of our young hero that this voice, as he had last heard it, was not altogether unknown to him.

"What would the world think if it knew of this adventure?" continued Laura, her voice appearing as if it were passing from a previously feigned to a now more natural tone, as if she either forgot that she had previously been disguising that voice somewhat, or as if she were now purposely allowing it to resume its wonted intonation.

"The world will never know from my lips anything that might be disagreeable or unpleasant," observed Jocelyn, a vague feeling of uneasiness now coming over him as his suspicions relative to the voice grew stronger and stronger.

Not that he could yet call to mind where he had ever heard that voice before, even if he had really ever heard it at all until this night. but he was full certain that it was undergoing a gradual change from an assumed melody to its natural one.

"Ah! you do not think, Mr. Loftus," observed Laura, her voice becoming more tremulous, as if vibrating with some strong feeling or growing passion, "you do not think that the world would give us credit for being such a good girl and boy as we really are? You fancy that the world, like a too suspicious parent, would be certain to believe that we have been naughty children?"

"Heavens, Miss Linden!" exclaimed Loftus, shocked at the gross indelicacy of the remark, and therefore speaking in a tone of unmistakable displeasure, "let us not talk in this strain. Indeed, unless you compose yourself to sleep, you will be thoroughly exhausted with fatigue and totally unfit to encounter all that we may have to accomplish to-morrow night."

" It is impossible to sleep with a strong current of air coming through this aperture," said Laura; and Jocelyn could hear by the elastic bound of her feet alighting upon the floor that she had leaped from the couch.

" Permit me to do my best to stop that aperture," he said, rising from his seat and slowly advancing through the darkness toward the alcove. " Perhaps I can replace the panel of the wainscot in such a manner as to protect you from the draught."

" I do not believe it possible," said Laura, in a tone which evidently came from lips that were pouting with subdued ill-humour at the moment.

" Then let us light a candle at any risk — "

" Ah! doubtless for you to see my face, now that you know the veil is off," she cried, with a merry laugh.

" I can assure you, Miss Linden, that I have no impertinent curiosity of such a nature," answered Jocelyn, in a voice coldly expressive of displeasure.

" Oh, no, no," ejaculated Laura, her humour suddenly changing again, and this time into a bitterness which she did not attempt to conceal, " you have no curiosity of any kind, Mr. Loftus; your heart is ice — ice to the very core. I declare that it is almost an insult to a young and beautiful woman as I am, that you have not spoken to me a single word such as young gentlemen do speak to young ladies. There — you know what I mean — but I cannot explain myself any better. At all events, I feel slighted, neglected. Why don't you answer me, sir? " she exclaimed, with a petulance almost amounting to rage as she stamped her foot upon the floor.

" Heavens! what a little demoness," thought Jocelyn within himself; but in a cold and apparently unmoved manner, he said, " Miss Linden, you thanked me just now for the brotherly kindness which, as you were pleased to observe, I manifested toward you when you felt unwell, and therefore you will perceive the inconsistency of at present accusing me of deliberately slighting you."

" Answer me one question, sir," exclaimed Laura, hastily and impetuously; " do you wish to escape hence? "

" Most assuredly," replied Loftus. " But wherefore a question so singular under the circumstances? "

" Because you cannot escape without my assistance,"

returned Laura; " and that assistance you are not so certain of having as you were just now."

" Good heavens! " exclaimed Loftus, bewildered and chagrined; " is it possible that I have really offended you? "

" I have already told you," said Laura, in a voice that again became low, deep, and tremulous, — but whether with real or affected emotion Jocelyn knew not, — " I have already told you that men of the highest rank and most brilliant position have besieged me with their overtures, some upon honourable terms, others upon dishonourable, and while I have spurned the latter, I have steadily refused the former. But wherefore? Because in my own heart I had already conjured up the ideal image of such a being as alone could win my love. To that idealism have I clung; it has been to me a dream and a worship, until at last I have felt that my very happiness depended upon its realization. I have pondered and pondered upon that image until I have led myself, as it were, to become desperately enamoured of it, and I have vowed that never, never, would I bestow my affections upon any one who did not realize in his person and his mind all that was beautiful, attractive, and endearing in that creation of my fancy. Conceive, then, my astonishment and my delight when on passing ere now into this chamber I beheld in you the personification of that delicious idealism."

" Miss Linden, not another word, not another syllable in this strain, I conjure you, I command you! " cried Loftus, in a tone but too plainly indicative of outraged feeling. " This scene reminds me of temptations, arts, and wiles to which I was exposed ere my captivity; and did I not believe that the three ladies to whom I now allude are far, far away from Paris, I should actually fancy that you were one of them," he added, vehemently. " Therefore, Miss Linden, for Heaven's sake, let us have no more of a scene which in truth is as derogatory to you as it is painful and revolting to me."

" Mr. Loftus," interrupted Laura, suddenly assuming a tone of decision, " I see that it is now necessary we should thoroughly understand each other; for you are more flinty-hearted than I had at first imagined."

" Yes, let us understand each other," said Loftus, " since it would seem that we had mistaken each other's character,

— I, in believing that you were a young lady of discretion as well as magnanimity, and you in supposing that I am unmindful of my duty alike to you and to myself."

"Oh, that we had a light!" exclaimed Laura Linden, sarcastically, "so that I might see your countenance flushing with the virtuous indignation that is doubtless now reddening it."

"But for the explanations?" said Loftus, impetuously.

"They will soon be given, so far as I am concerned," answered Laura. "Anxious and longing as I have been to effect my escape hence, yet that aspiration has now become secondary indeed to another hope which I have conceived, and on the fulfilment of which the former shall even be made to depend. For I am self-willed, Mr. Loftus, yes, self-willed and headstrong as I am petulant and impetuous; and therefore you must know, in one word, that I love you, and that if you scorn this love of mine it shall turn to the bitterest hatred."

"Miss Linden," observed Loftus, coldly indignant, "you will provoke me to say things to which I should be sorry to give utterance."

"Mr. Loftus, if you mean war to the death, then war let it be," cried Miss Linden; "but in that case, remember that I shall not hesitate to sacrifice myself in order to be revenged on you. I will therefore confess to the prefect's servant in the morning all the preparations for escape which have been made — "

"Foolish young woman! you will draw down a terrible punishment upon yourself," ejaculated Loftus. "You will perhaps be moved to another and far more dreadful prison."

"What of all that, so long as I gratify my revenge?" exclaimed Laura. "It is for you to decide whether you will provoke that vengeance, — whether you will continue to scorn, slight, and even insult me, or whether you will consent to gratify this whim I have conceived by becoming my lover for a week, a day, or only an hour, as you may choose. Oh, Mr. Loftus, do not remain thus hard-hearted! Remember that I am beautiful, very beautiful, and the world will know nought of what takes place between us in an hour of yielding tenderness."

"Temptress, who art thou?" exclaimed Jocelyn, now

becoming angry and almost enraged. "Thy voice is familiar to me; I am certain I have heard it before — "

"Yes," interrupted Laura, in a low tone; "and I have seen thee before, and I know more of thee than thou thinkest, and I could breathe in thy ear the name which ought to have been in the passport."

"Then, who art thou? Tell me who thou art," exclaimed our young hero, becoming more and more excited; "for there is something so strange, so mysterious in all this."

"Stay, let me whisper a word to your ear," said Laura, "and you will then see that I know everything concerning you."

"Speak aloud, Miss Linden!" cried Jocelyn, who perceived by the rustling of her dress that she was approaching him through the pitchy darkness which prevailed.

"Ah! you are afraid of me?" she exclaimed, scornfully. "Oh, what sickly sentimentalism, what a maudlin affectation of virtue is all this! Even the beauteous Louisa Stanley herself," she continued, with a marked accentuation upon a name which made Jocelyn start suddenly, "could scarce think well of one who seems not to be made of flesh and blood."

"You have alluded to a young lady," said Loftus, "whose example it were well, Miss Linden, if you would follow. But let me beseech and implore you to put an end to a scene as derogatory as it is painful, as humiliating as it is ridiculous."

There was a dead silence of nearly a minute, and then the lady's voice suddenly vibrated upon Jocelyn's ear, exclaiming, "Oh, I love thee, I love thee!" and the next instant he heard her come bounding toward him like a serpent flinging its coils through the utter darkness at some object which a mysterious instinct impelled it to seize upon, so that ere Jocelyn had leisure to step back even a couple of paces, he was clasped in the arms of his midnight companion.

Violent was that embrace, as if the young lady's impassioned nature were wrought up to a frenzied pitch. The plump white arms were thrown so suddenly around his neck and held him in so firm a clasp, and the lips of the temptress were instantaneously glued to his own with so burning an intenseness, that it seemed as if it were impossible for him to escape from the empire of such an Amazonian

assailant. But, immediately recovering his presence of mind, he endeavoured to disengage himself from her embrace, in which, however, she held him with all the greater tenacity. He used a little more violence, and then she clung to him with the force of desperation.

"Miss Linden, take care, I shall do you a mischief," cried Jocelyn.

"You would not ill-use a woman," replied Laura; and she covered his face with frantic kisses, as if hurried away by the torrent of raging passions which she could not control.

"By Heaven, this is intolerable!" cried Jocelyn. "O shameless young woman!"

"Ah! revile, abuse me as you will," said Laura, with a triumphant tone; "but I will either perish or compel you to fall vanquished into the arms of my consummated desires."

"You force me to extremes," cried Loftus, now seizing both her arms and somewhat violently disengaging them from about his neck.

Laura struggled desperately to retain her hold, and Jocelyn could hear her gasping and moaning with rage, like a subdued tigress, when she found herself baffled and defeated in the conflict. But be it well understood that he exhibited not the slightest unnecessary violence toward her; he merely put forth his strength to a sufficient degree to unlock her arms from his neck. The struggle was nevertheless a difficult one, inasmuch as it took place in the depth of a pitchy darkness, and it was therefore no fault of our hero's if Laura, suddenly tripping over a rug, fell heavily upon the floor, where she remained senseless.

For a few moments Loftus, though deeply grieved at this incident, fancied that her immovability and silence were only a pretence, but finding that she continued thus still and speechless, he stooped down and laid his hand upon her forehead. It was cold, and there was a clammy perspiration upon it. Beginning to be seriously alarmed, he placed his hand upon her heart, and felt that though it beat, the pulsation was nevertheless slow and feeble. A mortal terror now seized upon him, for he feared that she might be in reality seriously injured and perhaps about to die, and for a few instants he felt so bewildered as scarcely to know what course to pursue.

But suddenly it struck him that under such circumstances he must not hesitate to procure a light at any risk. The resolve was adopted and executed. Tinder, flint, steel, and matches were at hand; in another moment they were put into requisition, and he accordingly at once proceeded to strike a light.

The candle was lighted, he held it over the countenance of the lady who was stretched upon the floor, and an ejaculation burst from his lips. Heavens, was it indeed possible? And was the half-suspicion which he had ere now expressed so signally confirmed?

But at that ejaculation which thrilled from his lips the lady herself opened her eyes, looked up, and then gave vent to a wild cry of mingled disappointment, rage, and terror, for she saw that detection had overtaken her sooner than she had purposed or anticipated; and thus did accident reveal to Jocelyn Loftus the identity of the false Laura Linden with the depraved though beautiful Julia Owen.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PREFECT AND HIS GUESTS

We must now inform our readers that on this same memorable night when Jocelyn Loftus and Laura Linden, *alias* Julia Owen, were thrown together, the prefect of police entertained a few special friends at a choice supper in the saloon belonging to his own magnificent suite of apartments.

The prefect himself was in uniform, he having attended the Legislative Assembly that day in his ministerial capacity, and the gentlemen whom he was thus regaling with the elegant little banquet consisted of his own two private secretaries, the under-secretary of state for the Department of the Interior, and three well-dressed young men who had no ostensible profession nor any visible sources of income, but who nevertheless lived well and cut an excellent figure in the French metropolis. In plain terms, these last-mentioned individuals were pensioned spies, or *mouchards*, secretly attached to the prefecture of police.

We need hardly say that all the guests thus assembled were Frenchmen, and the conversation flagged not during the meal, as it usually does with Englishmen when similarly employed. On the contrary, the gastronomic proficiency of the prefect's cook, displayed as it was in substantial specimens of the art now served up on massive silver dishes, afforded not only delicious food for the palate but also for the discourse. The wines were of the most exquisite description and circulated freely; but with true French refinement in Apician indulgence and epicurean luxuriousness, the party lingered a long time over the banquet, drinking the healths of all the most beautiful women of the day, and pledging each other with brimming glasses and fervid pressures of the hand, in the true French style of cordial, heartfelt

conviviality. Now, as it was eleven o'clock before this festival commenced, it was some time past midnight ere it terminated. The prefect and his companions then passed into an adjoining saloon, where the tables were spread with a choice dessert, another and still more rare selection of wines, coffee, and burnt punch.

"I thought, my dear friend," said the under-secretary of the Interior, addressing the prefect of police, "that you promised to have that enormously rich English nobleman, the Marquis of Leveson, here to-night?"

"Such was my intention," responded the prefect, "and I believe it will yet be fulfilled. The marquis would have joined us earlier, but is obliged to be at the ball given by the British ambassador to-night. He however promised that he would get away soon after twelve and then come and join us."

"Is he making a long stay in Paris?" asked the under-secretary of state, whose name was Jules Martignac.

"He has been here about a fortnight, on business of a somewhat particular and delicate nature," returned the prefect, with a meaning smile.

"No doubt Monsieur Jules Martignac is as well acquainted with that business as ourselves," observed one of the prefect's private secretaries.

"No, indeed I am not," exclaimed the under-secretary of state. "Of course I could be if I chose, inasmuch as there are no secrets at the prefecture which are not known at the Ministry of the Interior. But to tell you the truth, I have been so very gay lately."

"Ah! Jules, you have doubtless found a new mistress?" exclaimed the prefect, laughing. "But was there ever such inconstancy as yours!"

"It is not in my nature to remain long faithful to any woman," observed Martignac, who was as vain and conceited as he was really handsome in person and elegant in manners. "But I was telling you that I have not lately had time to look over the secret reports from the prefecture to the Ministry of the Interior, and therefore I am not entirely acquainted with the object of Lord Leveson's visit to Paris. An inkling thereof I have gleaned, it is true, from what has been said in my presence on two or three occasions by the Minister and his confidential secretary."

" Well," exclaimed the prefect, who from the first moment he sat down to table with his friends had thrown off all official reserve, and who now laughed heartily at the thoughts which the present discourse had conjured up in his mind, " with regard to Lord Leveson's visit to Paris, I can safely say that of all the amusing incidents which ever came to my knowledge, certain matters involved in this affair are the most eminently diverting."

" I presume his lordship's visit to our gay capital," said Jules Martignac, " is in some way or another connected with the mission of those three young English ladies, — the Misses Owen, I mean, — who were appointed to proceed to Italy in order to occupy certain situations about the person of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline? "

" That is to say, the wife of the present prince regent of England," added one of the gentlemen spies.

" Precisely so," continued the prefect. " Well, and then these three girls, these Misses Owen, fall in with a certain young gentleman calling himself Jocelyn Loftus; and he, with more generous candour than astute discretion, tells them in plain terms that he has embarked in the Quixotic enterprise of thwarting all their schemes and preventing them from proceeding to Italy to fulfil their mission."

" The insensate Englishman! " exclaimed Jules Martignac. " But, after all, whether he had thus revealed his purposes to the young ladies, or not, would scarcely have signified in the long run; for the moment he set foot in Paris, every act and proceeding on his part was sure to become known to the authorities and be duly chronicled in the Black Books at the prefecture. Ah! " added the handsome but affected official, " what a blessing it is to have such a well-ramified system of police as we have got! "

" But you must observe in this case, Jules," said the prefect, " that it was not my business to trouble myself about Mr. Jocelyn Loftus or the Misses Owen unless in pursuance of the special wish of certain parties in England; and such wish was speedily intimated to our government. I need not remind you, my friends, that at the restoration of his Majesty Louis XVIII to the French throne in April last, a secret compact was made between this august monarch and the illustrious prince regent of England, to the effect that they should mutually forward, advance, and succour

each other's interests, aims, and purposes to the utmost of their power. Hence it followed, as a matter of course, that whatever project the prince regent of England might put in force with regard to his wife now in Italy was certain to be privately aided and abetted by the government of his Majesty Louis XVIII. Now, when Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, with more candour than discretion, made known his chivalrous designs to the three Misses Owen, they at once wrote off to England for instructions; and the immediate consequence was a private communication from the prince regent to our own most gracious sovereign, requesting that the person calling himself Jocelyn Loftus might be immediately arrested and detained in some secure place. As a matter of course, our excellent king, mindful of his compact with the prince regent, lost no time in complying with the demand; and the order to take the necessary steps in the matter was forthwith sent to me from the palace. Hereupon, I lost no time in causing the young man passing under the name of Loftus to be apprehended, on the ground that he was residing in France with a passport made out in a false name."

"And did not the police agent take possession of all the young Englishman's papers at Meurice's Hotel?" inquired Jules Martignac. "Methinks I heard something of the sort mentioned at the Ministry of the Interior."

"As a matter of course," replied the prefect; "all his correspondence was taken possession of and brought hither. The contents of those letters were not, however, very important, chiefly tending to show that Mr. Loftus was engaged to be married to a young lady named Louisa Stanley, who resides at Canterbury."

"Ah! that's the capital of the beautiful county of Kent," exclaimed Jules Martignac. "For you know that I have visited England? Well, and I have passed a few days in that fine old city of Canterbury. Its cathedral is sublime. But pray proceed. What else did the letters and papers show?"

"That there was a Miss Mary Owen, the youngest sister of the girls whom we have already been speaking of."

"Well, what of this Mary Owen?"

"Simply that she had run away from home, I believe, or else deserted her mother and sisters in some peculiar man-

ner, and had found a refuge with that same Miss Louisa Stanley at Canterbury. These were the principal points developed by the letters and papers seized at Meurice's Hotel," continued the prefect; "and not knowing how serviceable they might prove, I at once despatched them all to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent in London."

"But the three Owens who were on their way to Italy," inquired Martignac, "have they not continued their journey?"

"Two of them have," responded the prefect; "and have joined her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales by this time. They travelled under the escort of a certain Mrs. Ranger, who had charge of them."

"But first, your Excellency should recollect," exclaimed one of the prefect's private secretaries, "that even after the arrival of the instructions from England to arrest Mr. Loftus, it was deemed advisable that the three sisters should remain in Paris a few days, so as to await any fresh commands from England that might follow after the receipt of the letters and papers which were sent over to the prince regent."

"Exactly so," observed the prefect; "and in due course the Marquis of Leveson came over himself."

"The London papers hinted at the time," remarked one of the gentlemen spies, "that his lordship left England so suddenly to be out of the way while his niece's husband, a profligate fellow of the name of Dysart, was tried and hung. The statement was copied into all the French papers."

"To be sure!" exclaimed the prefect. "It was an excellent excuse for his lordship's sudden departure from England and visit to Paris. But I can assure you, from what I have heard the marquis himself say, that he felt not the slightest sympathy on account of his niece's husband; and we know that his lordship really came over to Paris about this affair of the Owens and Jocelyn Loftus. Well, the day after his arrival he sent the two eldest young ladies, — Miss Agatha and Miss Emma, I think their names are, — he sent them, I say, post-haste forward on their journey to Italy, along with Mrs. Ranger. But he kept the youngest of the three girls, whose name is Julia — "

"I thought you just now said Mary," observed Jules Martignac.

"No, no," replied the prefect. "Mary is the youngest of all, and is living with Miss Louisa Stanley at Canterbury. It is Julia, the youngest of the three over in France, whom the marquis kept with him."

"The wicked old fellow!" exclaimed Jules. "But I have heard that these Owen girls are ravishingly beautiful—"

"True! But you are quite wrong in your present suspicions," interrupted the prefect; "for the very same day that Miss Agatha and Miss Emma departed for Italy, Miss Julia was consigned a prisoner to the prefecture."

"Ha! ha! capital, was it not?" exclaimed the three gentlemen spies and the two private secretaries, all rubbing their hands with the air of men who were relishing an excellent joke. "Only fancy that sweet pretty girl, Julia Owen, being locked up in a gloomy room in the prefecture!"

"Indeed! and what was that for?" demanded Jules Martignac, now completely at fault as to the meaning and motive of the circumstances just related.

"You must know, in the first place," said one of the gentlemen spies, with a peculiar look, "that it was entirely of her own accord."

"And after full deliberation with Lord Leveson," observed another of the *mouchards*.

"And it must be borne in mind that the room in which she is placed," added the third spy, "is next to that of the handsome young Englishman who chooses to pass under the very euphonious and romantic name of Jocelyn Loftus."

"By all means tell us about this," exclaimed Jules Martignac. "It seems to be one of the most thoroughly romantic affairs I ever heard of."

"Well," said the prefect, now resuming the discourse, "I must observe, *en passant*, that the English people, with the disgusting pride and arrogant self-conceit that is so natural to them, are exceedingly fond of denouncing the French as being utterly demoralized; but from the very incidents of which we are speaking, and a variety of others which have come to my knowledge, I can assure you my candid and honest impression is that the aristocratic and higher classes of English society are the most depraved, profligate, and licentious in all the world."

"But the affair of this Julia Owen and Jocelyn Loftus?" exclaimed Jules Martignac, who did not want a lecture upon morals; "is it so very racy?"

"You shall judge for yourself," replied the prefect. "It appears that this same young gentleman, whom we shall still continue to call by his pseudonym of Jocelyn Loftus, professes a stoical degree of virtue which has naturally given great offence in certain quarters, where licentiousness is thereby put to the blush. Now, when the Marquis of Leveson came over to Paris, it was privately whispered in his ear by Mrs. Ranger that all the three sisters had become desperately enamoured of Jocelyn, but that Agatha and Emma had vainly attempted to thaw his ice-cold heart. The marquis, having a particular reason for breaking down all the ridiculous scruples which have taken such a hold upon Loftus, became much interested in what Mrs. Ranger told him; and summoning the three sisters, he succeeded in wheedling out of the two eldest a confession of all the wiles, manœuvres, and artifices which they had adopted to ensnare the object of their passion, while from young Julia's lips he elicited the avowal that she had not found an opportunity of trying the effect of her charms, but should rejoice at being enabled to enter on such a love-campaign. The mind of the marquis was at once made up, his plans were settled, and he proceeded to put them into execution. Agatha and Emma were sent forward with Mrs. Ranger, as I have already told you, to join the Princess Caroline in Italy; and the marquis then came to me with a request that Julia Owen might at once be placed in the next room to Jocelyn Loftus. As a matter of course, his lordship explained his reasons for a proceeding which at the first glance struck even me as extraordinary. He represented how necessary it was to undermine that stoical virtue which led Jocelyn Loftus into such Quixotic extremes, and which would inevitably lead him, when he regained his liberty, not merely to thwart, but also blazon forth to the whole world the long-concerted plots and deeply ramified intrigues that are now in progress relative to the Princess of Wales. It was quite clear, as the marquis observed, that Jocelyn knew too much on that point; and the only way to render him powerless was to detain him in prison, or else drag him down from the pedestal of his exalted virtue. Now, to keep

him for a very long time in custody would be to stand the risk of incurring great scandal; the thing might get mentioned by some opposition member in the Legislative Chamber, and the enemies of the government would make much of it. Therefore, as the marquis reasoned, what scheme could be better than to inveigle the young man within the circle of those temptations to which he was more likely to become susceptible in a state of captivity than when free? 'He must be looked upon as a serpent whose sting is his virtue,' said the marquis; 'let us rob him of that sting, and we render him powerless. We may thus defy him, whereas at present he is dangerous to a degree.' Thus reasoned the Marquis of Leveson; and I not only understood his views, but cheerfully consented to assist them to the utmost of my power. Julia Owen was to be the temptress to allure the young man from the pinnacle of his lofty virtue; she was the sorceress whose spells were to entice him from the pedestal of his exalted chivalry. The first step in the singular drama was therefore to assign her to the chamber next to Jocelyn. This was done, and the girl entered with romantic delight upon the task, all the details and arrangements of which she promptly planned and chalked out. Knowing that it was vain to endeavour to work at once upon his animal passions, she resolved to appeal to his refined and delicate sentiments. She therefore purposed to introduce herself to him in the light of a heroine, secure his admiration, win his confidence, and thus establish herself firmly in his favour before she allowed him to discover who she really was. The charwoman who waits upon the prisoners in that gallery was secretly ordered by me to further the designs of Miss Julia to the utmost of her power. To be brief, a variety of implements were supplied the young lady, to enable her to excavate an aperture in the wall, so that she might obtain entrance into Jocelyn's apartment. She would thus appear before him as his good genius, the heroine of an adventure promising escape for himself as well as for her."

"Ah! then she would be revealing herself too abruptly," exclaimed Martignac, "and before she was well assured of obtaining a strong hold on his confidence."

"All this was well weighed, considered, and calculated beforehand," returned the prefect; "and, as a heroine

ought to be a somewhat mysterious character, in order to inspire a deep interest as well as other engrossing sentiments, Miss Julia purposed to conceal her countenance in the folds of a thick veil, to disguise her voice, and to assume the sweetly romantic name of Laura Linden. The plan was altogether well digested. Conceive a heroic young lady breaking at midnight through the wall into a young gentleman's chamber, amusing this young gentleman with some romantic tale to account for her captivity and anxiety to escape, seeking every little opportunity to play upon his senses and bewilder him with a strange mystification, then holding out to him the promise of immediate flight from dreary prisonage, — conceive all this, I say, and then you will admit that it must indeed be a heart of stone on which such seductive influences could fail to make an impression. And now, Jules," continued the prefect, " and now what will you think when I tell you that this is the very night on which Julia Owen and Jocelyn Loftus are thus to meet. Yes, this very night is the curtain to rise upon the first act of the well-conceived drama; and indeed," added the prefect, as he consulted his watch, " it is probable that they have already met, for 'tis near one in the morning."

" But they are not really to escape together? " said Jules Martignac, inquiringly.

" Do you think me mad? " exclaimed the prefect. " No, no, Jocelyn will remain here as long as his virtue continues stubborn; but if he yield to the temptations of the siren Julia, then may he go about his business, and welcome."

" And how is the pretended endeavour to escape to be contravened? " asked Jules Martignac, delighted with the whole narrative.

" Not a link in the chain of the proceedings is deficient," responded the prefect; " everything is duly weighed, considered, and prearranged. For instance, the watchman, as he goes his rounds, will suddenly command the lights to be extinguished in Jocelyn's chamber. The order will be given authoritatively and accompanied with menaces; and therefore the light must be put out. Now, what is the result? The young gentleman and the young lady are left together in the dark, and Heaven only knows with what wiles, seductions, and blandishments the false Laura Linden will assail her very virtuous companion. At all

events, this young man must be something more or less than human if he resist the combined influences of such circumstances, temptations, and opportunities."

"I think so, too," observed the under-secretary of state, in a laconic tone, but with a salacious smacking of the lips. "And, therefore, you say that if he does really succumb either this night or on some early occasion —"

"Oh, once let him sink vanquished and overcome into the arms of Julia Owen," cried the prefect, "and he can no longer hold up his head as the champion of virtue. Ashamed, disgraced, and degraded in his own estimation, pulled down from the pedestal of his austere rectitude and immaculate chivalry, he will either be glad to conceal his diminished head in some solitary nook, or else, in an access of despair, will plunge deeper into the fount of bliss. And this latter theory is the more probable; for if the wiles, artifices, and seductions of the siren Julia once triumph, he will henceforth yield to the current of so irresistible an infatuation and devote all his thoughts to the beautiful mistress whom he will thus have gained, neither thinking of interference with the designs of the prince regent on the one hand, nor remaining bent upon contracting an unequal marriage with Louisa Stanley on the other."

"Ah! then there is an objection to this marriage, is there?" exclaimed Jules Martignac.

"Yes, I believe so," responded the prefect. "But that appears to be altogether a minor consideration in comparison with the one grand aim of disarming him as to his interference with the mission of the Owens."

While the prefect was yet giving utterance to the latter portion of this sentence, a valet entered the room; and the moment his master had ceased speaking, the servant advanced and whispered a few words in his ear.

"Good," said the prefect; then waiting an instant until the valet had withdrawn, he observed, "Well, my friends, it is as I had anticipated; for the watchman has just sent in word that he saw Mr. Loftus examining the window, and that upon raising his voice to command the lights to be put out, he beheld the shadow of a female form reflected upon the opposite wall, as it flitted across the young Englishman's chamber."

"Oh, happy fellow," cried the under-secretary of state,

" if he will but avail himself of the happiness within his reach! "

The door now again opened; but this time it was to usher in the Marquis of Leveson, who made his appearance in full evening costume, he having just quitted the mansion of the British ambassador. As soon as the wonted greetings were exchanged between himself and the prefect, and when also the nobleman had been duly presented to the assembled guests, he glanced significantly at the great police authority as if to inquire what news he had to impart relative to the affair that so particularly interested himself.

" We are all friends here, my lord," said the prefect; " and being all, as it were, officially connected, there are no secrets between us. My two secretaries are of course acquainted with all that transpires at the prefecture; these three gentlemen," he continued, glancing toward the spies, " hold secret offices of great trust in connection with the establishment; and that gentleman," added the prefect, looking toward Jules Martignac, " as the under-secretary of state for the Home Department enjoys of course a complete insight into everything that regards the police. But although, my lord, so many persons are thus acquainted with your special business in Paris and with all that regards the mission of the young English ladies in whom you are interested, yet the secret itself is as safe as if it were locked up only in your own breast; for the police establishment of this great capital sees but with the same eye, hears with but one ear, speaks with but one tongue, and thinks with but one brain. Although consisting of many persons, therefore, it is one great and indivisible whole, and impossible of proving faithless to itself."

" I thank your Excellency for these explanations and assurances," replied Lord Leveson; " and I entertain not the least apprehension for the safety of my secret. Since, then, we are all acquainted with its nature," he continued, glancing with an urbane smile around the board, " we may discourse without reserve thereon."

" Most assuredly," replied the prefect. " And now, my lord, I have the pleasure to announce to you, from information which I received a few moments before your lordship's arrival, that the grand scheme has reached its crisis, — the point at which it will either succeed speedily or fail signally."

"Ah!" exclaimed the marquis, his countenance lighting up with joy; "do you mean really to tell me that Julia Owen is at this moment with your prisoner? This is excellent, especially as I have brought some one with me — "

"Did I not assure your lordship this morning," interrupted the prefect, not heeding the last words of the nobleman, "that it would be for to-night?"

"Yes," responded Leveson; "and relying upon the accuracy of your Excellency's information, I have brought a certain person with me whom I wish to become a spectatress of her beloved Jocelyn in the arms of the seductive Julia."

"Ah!" ejaculated the prefect; "is it possible that you have caused Miss Louisa Stanley to come all the way from England to view her lover's infidelity, — supposing that such infidelity shall really take place?"

"And wherefore not kill two birds with one stone?" said the marquis, with a knowing look. "The opportunity was too good to be lost, and I accordingly availed myself of it."

"'Tis an admirable stroke of policy!" exclaimed Jules Martignac. "Yes, an admirable stroke of policy if your lordship be indeed anxious to break off the contemplated match between Louisa Stanley and this Jocelyn. And, by the bye, since I have heard that this Louisa is so beautiful," continued the vain young Frenchman, with a self-sufficient air, "perhaps your lordship would afford me an opportunity of making myself agreeable to her; for I should really like to have an English mistress."

"I am sorry that I cannot gratify you in this respect," returned the Marquis of Leveson, smiling; "but the fact is that Louisa Stanley is such a perfect angel of beauty I intend to try my own fortune with her first."

"But where is she?" inquired the prefect.

"On leaving the ambassador's just now," responded the marquis, "I drove around to the hotel where she is staying with me, and brought her hither in my carriage. She is now in the anteroom."

"And Mary Owen, who was staying with her at Canterbury?" said the prefect.

"Is still remaining there," answered Leveson, "in order to take care of Louisa's sick aunt during her absence.

Mary is harmless enough while thus employed, and while thus buried in that seclusion. But let us now take a peep into Jocelyn's chamber," added the marquis, turning his eyes upon the prefect as he rose from his seat.

" I am at your service, my lord," said that functionary. " Gentlemen, you must excuse us for a few minutes. We cannot take so large a party with us, especially as it appears there is a young lady to accompany us."

The Marquis of Leveson and the prefect, now quitting the saloon together, passed into the anteroom where Louisa Stanley was waiting. Her form was enveloped in an ample cloak; and a large bonnet, of the Swiss shepherdess-hat style then in vogue, shaded her features. But at the first glance which the prefect threw upon her he was indeed struck by the extraordinary beauty of her countenance, although the pallor of grief and the restless expression of acute suspense were upon every feature. Nor less was he enabled to remark that the very drapery which concealed her figure also developed its matchless symmetry; and beautiful as the prefect had fancied Julia Owen to be when he saw her on the day she was introduced to the prefecture, he was now instantaneously struck with the fact that her charms were thrown completely into the shade when compared with the transcendent loveliness of Louisa Stanley. The thought therefore traversed the prefect's brain that it would really, after all, be but a little matter of wonder if the mere image of the pure-minded, innocent, and angelic Louisa should preserve Jocelyn's fidelity immaculate and intact against all the seductive wiles and wanton fascinations of Julia Owen.

" This gentleman, Miss Stanley," said the Marquis of Leveson, introducing the French official to the young lady, " is his Excellency the Prefect of Police; and he will now explain to you, painful though the subject must be, that the individual whom you have known and unfortunately learned to love as Jocelyn Loftus has been incarcerated in the prefecture on account of his grievous immoralities and wild excesses."

" Oh, heavens, if this be indeed true! " exclaimed Louisa, clasping her hands and bursting into tears; but almost instantly wiping away those crystal drops of bitter, bitter anguish, and with a sudden resumption of an air of maiden

dignity, she said, in a tone of forced calmness, "But I am nerved to hear the worst, after all the terrible things that your lordship, with so much disinterested and indeed paternal kindness, has told me."

While giving utterance to this latter portion of her sentence, with a frank and artless confidence in what she believed to be the good feeling of the Marquis of Leveson, the maiden fixed her blue eyes mournfully upon him; and then she turned those plaintive regards upon the prefect, with a look that seemed to implore him to state all he knew at once with as much brevity as possible.

"Young lady," said the prefect, now also thinking it right to play the paternal, and therefore assuming an air and a tone which seemed to imply that he was performing a very painful task and accomplishing a most disagreeable duty, "young lady," he repeated, "it is better that you should hear at once the real character of him who has gained your affections than that you should make so important a discovery when it has become too late to retreat from an unfortunate marriage. The plain truth is, that you have been wooed and your heart has been won by a mere adventurer living under a feigned name, and pursuing a career of reckless extravagance, deep dissipation, and inveterate profligacy."

"O God! have mercy upon me!" murmured the unhappy Louisa; and then she compressed her lips forcibly to keep back the scream that rose up from her anguished heart to the very tip of her tongue. "But pray go on, sir, go on," she cried, with nervous trepidation, as she once more wrestled successfully against the harrowing poignancy of her feelings, or, rather, fortified herself with the unnatural composure of despair.

"It is too true, then, Miss Stanley," said the prefect, encouraged by the significant signs and nods which the marquis gave him, unperceived by the unfortunate girl whom the two wretches were thus basely torturing, "it is too true that Jocelyn Loftus has conducted himself in such a manner since his arrival in Paris as to scandalize society; and the strong arm of the law has been compelled to interfere to punish him for his excesses. Not that he has committed any positive crime; but his debaucheries, his seductions, and his moral offences have brought dishonour

on the name of Englishmen. Therefore, availing myself of the fact that he was sojourning in France under a false name, — a circumstance rendering him amenable to the law, — I have been compelled, in my capacity as guardian of the public morals, to incarcerate him within these walls."

"I dare not disbelieve you, sir, I cannot doubt your word," said Louisa, gazing vacantly around, as if her senses were abandoning her; "but yet it appears to me so impossible, indeed, it looks so like a monstrous dream — "

"Alas! my dear young lady," said Lord Leveson, as he took her hand with much apparent kindness, "you perceive that it is but too true. Besides which, so high a functionary and so honourable a man as the prefect of police would not possibly be guilty of an injustice, on the one hand, toward the person calling himself Jocelyn Loftus, nor, on the other hand, would he so uselessly deceive or so wantonly afflict a young damsel like you."

"Assuredly not," exclaimed the prefect. "But I forgive these doubts, this uncertainty, this incredulity, which Miss Stanley displays. They are the evidences of that generous confidence and sublime trust which the loving heart naturally reposes in the object of its affections. But as it is my painful duty to put an end to all your doubts, come hither, young lady, come hither."

Thus speaking, the prefect opened a side door, and led the way into a little cabinet, or office, where a lamp was burning on a table. And upon this same table lay an enormous book with a black cover. It was thicker and larger than the thickest and largest Bible ever used in a Protestant church; and upon the back of the binding, which was at least a foot wide, were stamped, in dingy gold letters, these words, "Le Livre Noir;" which, being translated into English, mean, "The Black Book."

Opening this huge volume, and hastily turning over the leaves, which were full of manuscript entries in as many different styles of writing as it is possible to conceive, the prefect paused at a particular page, ran his finger down a certain column, stopped at a special entry, and said, "Behold, Miss Stanley, the record of the arrest."

Louisa threw her shuddering looks upon the ominous page, and hastily scanned the particular lines which were pointed out to her. Those lines comprised an entry which, if trans-

lated into English, would read as follows: " An Englishman; aged about three and twenty; arrested for having his passport made out in the false name of Jocelyn Loftus; his real name is known to the prefect, but for special reasons is not mentioned here. See, however, Prefect's Private Minute Book, Folio 2011, second column, fifteenth line from the top."

" I wish to see no more," murmured the unhappy Louisa, in a dying tone. " I have already seen too much."

" And yet, young lady," said the marquis, " for your own complete satisfaction you will consent to behold the crowning proof of your false lover's wickedness and depravity, — that crowning proof which I have brought you hither at this late hour to witness. By your Excellency's permission," continued the marquis, turning toward the prefect, " we will now repair — "

" I understand," interrupted the prefect. " Come with me."

Thus speaking, he led the way from the little cabinet, the door of which he carefully locked behind him; then, passing out of the anteroom, he took a lamp in his hand and conducted the marquis and Louisa up a staircase, at the summit of which there was a massive door. Having noiselessly and cautiously opened this door by means of a key which he had with him, he led the way down a long, gloomy passage containing a row of doors, at the last but one of which he stopped short.

" Now follow me with the utmost caution and on tiptoe," he said, speaking in a low whisper to the marquis and Louisa; then, having opened the door with an evident desire to avoid the chance of even a hinge creaking, he deposited the lamp in a niche in the passage, and stole into the chamber.

Louisa Stanley now hung back, and staggered against the wall, as if a faintness was coming over her; for shocked, afflicted, and also indignant as she was at the thought of her lover's profligacy and perfidy, her pure soul nevertheless revolted from the idea of becoming a witness of any proof of his guilt.

" Go on, young lady, go on," whispered the Marquis of Leveson, in a hurried tone; " you must see out this matter to the end, and sustain your courage until the very last."

Startled into a feverish excitement rather than inspired with any real feeling of curiosity, Louisa Stanley passed

into the chamber, whither, however, the marquis did not follow her. But he remained upon the threshold, as if contented to hear the report which might presently be made to him, instead of witnessing with his own eyes the scene itself.

Noiselessly and rapidly did Louisa glide into that chamber; but scarcely had she advanced half a dozen paces, when through the gloom which prevailed she beheld a light shining dimly in, as it were, from the depths of some recess. At this moment the prefect took her by the hand, and hurried her forward in the direction where that light seemed to be burning. A few paces more, and Louisa now saw that this light was really in an adjacent chamber, whence it emanated through an aperture in the partition wall.

Close up to this opening did the prefect hurry the affrighted maiden, for affrighted she really was at an appearance of so sinister a nature, inasmuch as it really seemed at the moment as if through the vista of gloom her eyes were resting upon a light coming from a vaulted sepulchre. But at the same instant that this thought traversed her imagination, a well-known voice struck upon her ear, — ay, struck upon her brain, vibrating down every chord that led even unto her heart's core; and this voice said, in a tone of impassioned remonstrance, " Oh, you will drive me mad, you will drive me mad! "

A shriek rose to the very margin of Louisa's lips, even as a fountain, when disturbed at its depths, bubbles up to the very brim. But the sound was instantaneously stifled and subdued before it burst forth; for an overwhelming sense of utter misery fell crushingly upon the maiden, like an awful consternation, as she heard the melodious tones of a female voice replying, with the fervour of passion, " Oh, Jocelyn, dear Jocelyn, thou knowest that I love thee! "

Louisa heard no more. The consternation which stifled her scream struck another blow and deprived her of consciousness, so that she reeled half-around and fell heavily upon the floor.

" Good heavens! " exclaimed Jocelyn, from the inner apartment, " what sound was that? " and seizing the light from the table, he sprang toward the aperture.

Thrusting the lamp to the entire length of his arm through the opening, its rays fell full upon the countenance of the

damsel, whom the prefect was now hurriedly raising from the floor. But, oh, what words can depict the hurricane of amazement and the tornado of agonizing thoughts and wildering ideas which swept, all in a moment, like a flight of barbed arrows, through Jocelyn's brain, when the glare of that lamp fell upon the pale, inanimate, but ever lovely countenance of his own Louisa?

A cry of rage, a yell of madness burst furiously from him; but, quick as thought, the prefect bore the senseless maiden from the room, the door of which was immediately closed. In the frenzied excitement to which he was now a prey, Jocelyn dropped the lamp from his hand; and it was instantaneously extinguished as it fell upon the floor of the adjacent chamber, into which he had thrust it through the aperture.

"Heavens! what is the matter?" exclaimed Julia Owen, startled and affrighted by the suddenness of the scene which thus terminated all in a moment in utter darkness.

"Oh, wretch, profligate, demoness that thou art!" cried Jocelyn, in a voice indicative of a rending anguish; "thou hast ruined me in the eyes of my beloved!"

And as the last word thrilled from his lips with all the wildness of delirium, he fell heavily upon the floor.

"Jocelyn, Jocelyn, speak to me, speak to me!" shrieked Julia Owen, a mortal terror now seizing upon her, for this scene was dreadful in the depth of that pitchy darkness. "Good heavens! he does not answer me!" Then groping her way to the spot where he had fallen in the alcove whence the bed, it will be remembered, was drawn out, she stooped down and placed her hand upon his face.

His features were motionless, though bathed in those cold damps that send a chill through the warm living flesh that comes in contact with them; and her terror now increasing almost to an agony, she placed her ear to his lips. But she could catch the sound of neither breathing nor gasping; and while her brain reeled and she felt as if she were going mad, she placed her hand upon his heart. It throbbed not, no pulsation could she feel, and with a loud cry that rang forth thrillingly and wild upon the night air, she said, "He is dead, he is dead! My God! 'tis I whose wickedness has killed him. O God! O God!" and then all consciousness abandoned her.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HANGMAN IN HIS GLORY AGAIN

It was about ten o'clock in the morning; and Mr. Daniel Coffin, having disposed of the beards of all his customers, proceeded to scrape off his own. Seldom was the ludicrous more singularly blended with the ferocious than in the expression of that man's countenance, as he stood before the glass making those grimaces which usually accompany the progress of the razor over the parts whence the capillary stubble is to be removed. Having shaved himself as closely and neatly as he could, the Hangman ascended to his bed-chamber, where he proceeded to dress himself in his Sunday's apparel; and his toilet being completed, he went down again to his parlour, where he ordered Sally Melmoth to give him a dram of brandy, "to keep the cold out of his stomach."

"And where are you off to so smart this morning?" she inquired, as she handed him the liquor.

"Ay, where indeed?" asked her brother Dick.

"Well, you'll be surprised, perhaps, when I tell you," returned Coffin; then, looking hastily around, and observing that Jack the Foundling was not in the room at the moment, he said, in a low voice, "I am going to call on our friend, Mr. Larry Sampson."

"Larry Sampson!" ejaculated the brother and sister, with looks of amazement. "What on earth can you want with him?"

"Well, I suppose you are not afraid of my going to his place," observed the Hangman, with a grim smile of mingled cunning and ferocious satisfaction; "it's no longer the lion's den into which a fellow situated as I was didn't dare poke his head; and though Larry himself was for a short

time a lion in my path, yet he has lost his claws and his teeth now so far as I am concerned. He can't bite or yet scratch. The royal pardon," added Coffin, tapping his pocket significantly, " has made me proof against all dangers in that quarter."

" Of course, we know that," observed Sally Melmoth. " But why go near such a person at all? The very look of him must be odious, after all you suffered on his account, playing at hide-and-seek as you was, and all the latter part of the time not daring to go to your old haunts either at the Folly Bridges, or Polly Scratchem's, or any of the flash cribs, because we got the information that they were all being watched by Larry's men."

" Well, well, what's the use of recapitulating all these things that we know so thoroughly? " cried the Hangman. " The fact is, Larry got scent, somehow or another, of my being alive and kicking; and, by jingo! now that the thought strikes me," ejaculated the man, his countenance suddenly assuming a look terribly ferocious, " I do really believe that I can guess who it was that gave Larry a hint of my having escaped the Thames and being still in the land of the living."

" Ah! who do you think? " exclaimed Dick Melmoth.

" Not the Foundling, eh? " said Sally.

" Not at all," answered Coffin. " I know poor Jack is staunch. But who was the first person that I went to after leaving Beechey Manor? "

" Taggarty, to be sure! " cried both brother and sister, as it were, in the same breath.

" Ay, that's it," said Coffin, with a look gloomily ominous. " Don't you recollect the fellow wouldn't either have me in his house to live a short while, nor would he lend a hand in putting Larry quietly and comfortably out of the way when there was such a capital opportunity. Besides, the very fact that Larry was there that night — "

" Yes, but that was about Jack the Foundling," observed Dick Melmoth.

" Ah! but when once a fellow gets any way in league or connection with a Bow Street runner," exclaimed the Hangman, dogmatically, " you never can tell what he may be enticed into. At all events, it's very certain," he continued, " that from the moment I went and showed

myself at Taggarty's, all the flash cribs and boozing-kens were closely watched by Larry's spies."

"To be sure! The information was deuced soon passed around to all the knowing ones," observed Dick Melmoth, "and so we lost no time in putting you up to what was going on. Why, there was Joe Parkes's on Saffron Hill, Sharp Mawley's over in the Mint, Meg Blowen's in the Almonry, Polly Scratchem's down in Whitechapel, and Bencull's crib in Jacob's Island, — they were all close watched, day and night, without ceasing."

"And devilish lucky it was, then, that I hadn't gone to either," said Daniel Coffin, "as was my original intention. But by going and staying first with Old Jeremy Humpage in Whitechapel, then with the Swag Chovey Bloak in St. George's Fields, I managed to escape all Mr. Sampson's devices till the very day that Dysart was to be hung and I was wanted again at the Old Bailey. Come, give me another glass of lush," he exclaimed, with a chuckle that sounded like the subdued growl of a hyena; "for, after all, I like talking of these things when they are all past and gone and the danger's over."

"And so you really do suspect Taggarty?" said Sally Melmoth, as she refilled the Hangman's glass.

"Well, I don't see how the devil I can help suspecting him," returned Coffin. "The idea flashed to my mind all in a moment; but it at once took a deep root there, and now let me tell you that if I was to think over it a hundred years, I couldn't be more convinced than I am at this instant that it was Taggarty who must have peached."

"But what are you going to Larry Sampson's for this morning?" asked his mistress.

"Why, there's five or six fellows to be tucked up down in the country," answered the Hangman, with a sinister leer; "and I was going to ask Larry just to drop a note to the sheriffs of those counties and recommend me as a gentleman which does his business in a neat, agreeable, and workman-like manner in the hanging line," and he gave another low, chuckling laugh the mirth of which was as pleasant as that of a hyena.

"But you don't want such country custom, do you?" asked Sally, in surprise.

"No such thing," returned Coffin; "but what I do want

is an excuse to have a chat with Larry Sampson. I dare say he'll let bygones be bygones and talk pleasant enough when he sees that I am civil on my side. Larry isn't a fellow to bear grudges; but I am, though, desperately, infernally," he added, with terrible emphasis.

"And what do you want to talk to him about?" asked Sally, now questioning the Hangman with more timidity than at first, for his temper appeared to be lowering. "But perhaps you hope to be able to worm out some secrets from Larry Sampson?"

"A little in that way," responded the Hangman, with a grim smile, which reassured his mistress and her brother as to the condescending and communicative humour he was in. "What I chiefly want to see is whether Larry will speak to me about Jack the Foundling at all. For don't you see that it was so odd he should get all that information from Taggarty, drop so many hints about the lad's probably being the son of well-to-do parents, and then suddenly take no more notice of the matter than if he had never made any such inquiries at all? So I mean to try and draw Master Larry out in that respect."

"And how shall you do it?" inquired Dick Melmoth.

"Don't you see, I've got my excuse all ready cut and dried for Larry," continued the Hangman; "and I shall tell him that the reason I want to get these country execution jobs is to have an opportunity of letting the Foundling try his hand at tucking the chaps up, as I shall say that I mean to make a Jack Ketch of him. So now don't you see that if there is any truth at all in the idea of the Foundling belonging to a respectable family, Larry will deuced soon be horrified at the idea of the young fellow taking to the gallows functions; and he'll tell me to wait awhile or think better of it, or something of that sort; and if he does this, then we shall really know that he didn't make all those inquiries about the lad Jack for nothing at all."

"Well, really, Daniel," said his mistress, coaxingly, "I always knew you was a wide-awake fellow, but I didn't give you credit for so much cunning as all this."

"Nor I," observed Dick Melmoth; "and I do believe you'll succeed in getting something out of Larry, after all."

" And if you do find that Jack is the son of respectable parents," observed Sal, " you'll be able to make a pretty penny of the business, eh? "

" Well, we shall see," and the Hangman was about to sally forth, when suddenly recollecting something, he felt the pockets of his coat, and then exclaimed, " By Satan! I was going without my tools, and that's a thing I don't often do, seeing that they very frequently come into use at a moment when it's least expected that they'll be wanted at all."

Dick Melmoth hastened to open a cupboard, whence he took forth a bunch of skeleton keys, which he wrapped up in paper so as to prevent them from jingling. He next produced from the same place a small " jimmy," or crowbar, about a foot and a half long, and about the thickness of the thumb, but of the strongest wrought iron, and admirably shaped for burglarious purposes. He then drew forth a small tin box an inch and a half in diameter, and filled with wax, which was used to take the impression of a key should such process be required for ulterior purposes. Lastly, Dick Melmoth produced a couple of knitting-needles, pointed in a particular manner, and used for cutting panes of glass in the same way as a glazier's diamond.

All the articles just detailed did Mr. Daniel Coffin secure about his person; and as he wore a sort of shooting-coat, the crowbar lay easily enough lengthwise at the bottom of one of his capacious pockets. But it must not be supposed that the Hangman had any special purpose now in view in thus arming himself with the implements of his secret profession. The fact was that he seldom if ever stirred abroad without those little articles, which might at any moment come unexpectedly handy; and as habit is second nature, he positively would not have felt comfortable had he omitted his usual practice in this respect.

Sallying forth accordingly, with the royal pardon in one of his pockets and the implements of burglary distributed about in all the others, Mr. Daniel Coffin took his way to Long Acre. On knocking at the door of Larry Sampson's house, his summons was answered by Dame Margery, the officer's housekeeper, to whom the person of the Hangman was not known. Not that she was, however, at all prepos-

sessed in his favour; for, as the reader is already aware, he had a most hangdog look about him, even when attired in his best apparel.

"Is Mr. Sampson at home?" he asked.

"No, he is not," responded Dame Margery, eying him askance, and keeping the door half-closed.

"But I want to see him very particularly," said the Hangman. "Indeed, it's about professional business," he added, with a significant look.

"Then who are you?" inquired the woman.

"Lord bless you!" returned the Hangman, "my functions are up there in the Old Bailey," and as he spoke, with a still deeper significancy of look, he jerked his thumb over his left shoulder in the direction of the locality which he had named.

Now it instantaneously struck Dame Margery that the fellow must be a turnkey from Newgate; and, with this belief, she had no longer any hesitation in admitting him into the house. She accordingly requested him to walk in and wait a short time, observing that it was more than probable that Mr. Sampson would not be long before he returned. Daniel Coffin at once accepted the invitation, and was forthwith conducted into the breakfast-parlour, where Dame Margery left him. But after waiting upwards of three-quarters of an hour, the Hangman got tired of remaining there doing nothing; and he thought that he might as well repair to the nearest public-house and regale himself until Mr. Sampson should return. He accordingly issued forth from the parlour with the view of telling the housekeeper whither he was going, and requesting that a message be sent to inform him when her master came back; but though he coughed, hemmed, and stamped with his foot, in order to attract the attention of Dame Margery, no response was given to his summons. Fancying she might be up-stairs, he coolly and quietly ascended to the story above; for Mr. Daniel Coffin was not accustomed to be over-nice or delicate in the observance of ceremony and the punctilios of etiquette.

"Hem! hah! I say, now then! Will nobody answer?" he exclaimed, on reaching the landing of the first floor; but all was silent, — for the very simple reason that Dame Margery was down in the kitchen attending to her culinary

duties, and being rather deaf, she heard not the Hangman's voice.

As for the servant of all work, she had gone out upon an errand; and thus did it happen that no attention was paid to Mr. Coffin.

"Well, I suppose the place is deserted," he muttered to himself, in that low, growling tone which was peculiar to him when vexed or annoyed; and opening the door that was nearest, he looked in and perceived that it was a handsomely furnished drawing-room. "Upon my word, Mr. Sampson is quite a gentleman. Ah! he must have made a good thing of his business — no doubt of it!" added the Hangman, as he glanced around the well-appointed apartment. Then stepping forth upon the landing again, he closed the door behind him. "I wonder what this room is," he now said, as he grasped the handle of another door; but it was locked.

Obedient to some strange and scarcely accountable impulse, Daniel Coffin stooped down to peep through the keyhole; but he found it impervious to his view, being closed on the inner side, and he muttered to himself, "Well, this is a peculiar lock, made on purpose to prevent anybody from looking through it."

Such a circumstance was quite enough to arouse the curiosity of the Hangman; and without any more ado he at once took forth his skeleton keys, and thrust one of them into the lock, in which it turned without difficulty. The door was opened accordingly, and Coffin entered the apartment.

And now it would be difficult to describe this individual's amazement at the first glance which he cast around the room; for the walls were studded with innumerable pegs, to which hung an infinite assortment of male and female dresses. These were evidently intended and used as disguises; and as the Hangman contemplated this singular wardrobe with a closer scrutiny, he observed that it contained the specimen of almost every costume then existing in England. There was even the court dress, as well as the soldier's uniform; the fashionable suit of a West End dandy was side by side with the lace-bedizened livery of a domestic servant. The complete costume of a sportsman was suspended next to the ragged garb of a beggar; the dress of

a stone-mason was in contrast with that of a sweep. The characteristic apparel of a parish beadle hung next to the mud-besmeared garb of a peasant; and the rough dress of a sailor was close to the modest uniform of a postman. In fine, the dresses of all grades and classes, as well as of both sexes, were comprised in this perfect museum of costume; and it was quite clear that the individual possessing such an extraordinary collection could at any moment transform himself into the semblance of a peer or a peasant, a parson or a postman, a sportsman or a soldier, a tailor or a tinker, a gentleman or a gipsy, a mariner or a pickpocket, a rollicking highwayman or a mean petty thief, a substantial farmer or a needy mendicant, a costermonger or a ballad singer, a fortune-teller or a match-woman, a fish-fag or a gipsy, or, in fine, any member of any grade, class, or section of society.

But these transformations were not to be made only by means of the various dresses suspended around; other auxiliaries and accessories were likewise at hand in this apartment. Thus, upon a long shelf stood a row of barber's blocks, each surmounted with a wig; and as a matter of course these wigs were of different colours, shapes, and qualities, affording specimens of all the varieties of the peruke species. Then, on another shelf, there were false whiskers, mustachios, and beards, — yes, and even false eyebrows; and on a third shelf were pots of rouge, hair-powder, paints, colours, and dyes of all shades, degrees, and descriptions.

There was one more feature of interest in this room which came in for a due share of the Hangman's attention; and this was an enormous book, as large as a church Bible, and the contents of which were divided into three specific departments. The first was a list of all the bad characters, male and female, infesting the metropolis; and against every name was affixed the date of its entry in that book, thereby showing how long each individual in the category had been under the surveillance of Mr. Lawrence Sampson. The second compartment contained a list of all the flash cribs, boozing-kens, fence-shops, low lodging-houses, and places of vile resort in which the metropolis abounded; and so complete was the information given by this list, that to every den thus specified was added the name of the

person keeping it, followed by memoranda of what sort of characters frequented it, the sums paid for accommodation or refreshment, and all other particulars calculated to be of service to a Bow Street officer. The third compartment of this extraordinary book consisted of a journal, or diary, in which Mr. Lawrence Sampson was wont to enter minutes of his proceedings, remarkable incidents, gleanings and experiences, personal adventures, or any other matters worth recording in connection with his avocations.

The reader will naturally suppose that on discovering this book of mysteries the curiosity of the Hangman was instantaneously excited to ascertain first of all whether his own name figured in the category of bad characters; and on turning to the proper page and column, according to the alphabetical arrangement of the entries, he not only found the name of Daniel Coffin duly chronicled, but also the startling fact, as proved by the date annexed, that Mr. Lawrence Sampson had been aware of his real character for some years past.

As a matter of course, all the low cribs and boozing-kens, as well as all other vile haunts and infamous receptacles throughout the metropolis, were chronicled in the second compartment. But as the reader may perhaps be curious to learn the manner in which Mr. Sampson kept his ledger of demoralization, debauchery, poverty, mendicity, and crime, we will quote a few miscellaneous extracts from this division of the great book:

"Rose and Crown, Church Lane, St. Giles's. Weekly club held here; chiefly of street-hawkers, costermongers, labourers, chimney-sweepers, and beggars; the women frequenting this place are nearly all Irish. A young fighting fellow in a flannel jacket (name forgotten) generally presides; always has a plate before him containing the subscription-money to pay for the gin, beer, and tobacco. Sometimes the company amuse themselves by dancing reels; or else a fellow named Garry, formerly in the 18th Hussars, gives an exhibition of the shillalah dance. The landlord's name is —

"Sidney Smith, Dock Street, Whitechapel. Evening concerts; dreadful low class of women, always on the look-out for sailors flush of cash. Dancing as well as music; each person who dances pays twopence for the benefit of the musician.

"The Black Bull, Windmill Street, Haymarket. Music and dancing at this place; singing to a piano accompaniment. Most of the men frequenting this house are cross-coves, thimblemen, or swell-mobsmen; the females are women of the town. A great many juveniles visit this house, young thieves with their girls. The waiter is a comic fellow, sings comic songs, is on good terms with everybody, and sips of everybody's brandy and water with the most condescending friendship; always calling out for 'ladies and gentlemen to give their orders.' The songs sung at this place are not indecent; mostly humourous. One of the most favourite flash songs begins in this way:

"'A cross-cove is in the street for me,
And I a poor girl of a low degree;
If I was as rich as I am poor,
Ye never should go on the cross no more.

CHORUS

"'He's a right down chap, a chickle leary chap, and a loving cove!'

"Penny Theatre, Shorts' Gardens. Frequented by boys, girls, and all kinds of juvenile thieves and prostitutes; always dreadful bad language before the curtain draws up. The last night I was there saw a drunken combat as an interlude between 'George Barnwell' and a scene from the 'Beggar's Opera.' Performers about ten in number; most of them go about attending fairs and shows in the season.

"Red House in the Mint. Two people sleep in each bed, threepence a night. The grossest scenes of immorality constantly occurring in this place.

"The Mogul, Drury Lane. Large room holding several hundred persons; concerts and performances every night. Frequented by all kinds of people; great numbers of dissolute livery servants meet here, also young apprentices and their girls. The landlord keeps it as respectable as he possibly can.

"Thompson's Lodging-houses, Castle Street, Long Acre, Nos. 23, 24, 25. Make up between sixty and seventy beds between them. Thompson has similar houses over in Mint Street; most detestable places, frequented by the worst of

characters. Every feeling of decency totally lost sight of, persons of both sexes and all ages sleeping promiscuously; grown-up brothers and sisters thus sleep together.

" Southgate's Lodging-houses are in Mitre Court, St. John's Street; New Court, Cow Cross, Smithfield; Turnmill Street, Clerkenwell; and on Saffron Hill; altogether making up three hundred beds every night.

" Grout's Lodging-houses in St. Giles's are filled with low truckle-beds, supplied with a straw mattress, two coarse sheets, and an old rug. Here the poor but honest labouring man is in nightly company with the professional thief; while perhaps his wife and grown-up daughters are compelled to herd with the vilest prostitutes. As a matter of course, the people frequenting these lodging-houses consist of various descriptions, and each description may again be subdivided into various classes. It is a most truthful remark which I have heard, that ' the miscroscope shows the subdivision of atoms, and a minute inquiry into various classes subdivides society into unimagined grades.'

" No. —, Wentworth Street, Whitechapel, is a kinchinken. The fellow who keeps it is called the kidsman; he boards and lodges young boys, training them up to be thieves. Always has at least twenty boys in his establishment; the young ones are instructed by the elder, and are never allowed to go out before they are quite perfect."

These and numerous other entries, especially those regarding the Hangman's favourite haunts, met his view; nor did he fail to observe that Taggarty's shop on Mutton Hill was mentioned in the category as a place where cheeses, flitches of bacon, bladders of lard, and all kinds of chandlery were purchased " without any questions being asked." But no words can describe the amazement, the consternation, and even the stupefaction which seized upon Daniel Coffin when on searching for the entry relative to Bencull's Dark Crib in Jacob's Island, he found the following memorandum appended: " See my journal, Wednesday, Sept. 19, 1814, for the account of how I visited this place disguised as a knife-grinder, and how I was thrown into the black ditch, escaping with my life in a manner truly miraculous."

Yes, stupefied indeed was the Hangman as these words met his view. All his thoughts were suddenly congealed, all his ideas were frozen in a moment. But when he some-

what recovered himself, and his reflections once more flowed on in their proper channel, mystery after mystery was cleared up relative to past incidents, and truth after truth revealed itself to his comprehension. Yes, for when he glanced around and beheld all those varied and admirably contrived disguises, he was no longer at a loss to understand how the whole plot relative to the burglary at Mrs. Owen's had been discovered by Larry Sampson; for that the knife-grinder and the officer were identical was a fact now placed beyond all possibility of doubt; and what, then, was more probable but that the country bumpkin in the tap-room of the King's Arms at Richmond was also the ubiquitous and protean Lawrence Sampson?

But while he was still pursuing his hurried and startling reflections in this manner, Daniel Coffin hastened to turn to the third compartment of the great book; and there, sure enough, he discovered a detailed account of all the officer's proceedings while engaged in prosecuting his inquiries and researches into the outrage offered to the prince regent and the Marquis of Leveson, as detailed in earlier chapters of our narrative. A further investigation into Mr. Sampson's diary showed Daniel Coffin that Taggarty had not betrayed him to the officer, but that the seeming beggar-woman who had so importunately solicited alms of him as he issued from Taggarty's house on the night in question was in reality Lawrence Sampson. Other facts did the Hangman also ascertain concerning matters that either interested himself or those persons with whom he was connected; but we shall not pause to enter into minuter details now. Suffice it to say, that without for an instant recollecting the possibility, or indeed the probability, of being interrupted while prying into the mysteries of the bulky volume, he continued to study its contents with the deepest attention; and the more profoundly he examined into it, the more was he astonished and bewildered at the extraordinary mass of information which Lawrence Sampson had acquired relative to all the bad characters and flash houses in London. Nor less was the Hangman astounded at the remarkable perseverance, the unflinching dauntlessness, the exquisite skill, and the reckless indifference to danger which characterized the Bow Street officer, and which qualities were made apparent enough by the various

adventures, enterprises, and proceedings chronicled in the diary.

We must, however, leave Daniel Coffin for a few minutes to peruse the entries chiefly regarding himself or his companions in iniquity, while we proceed to furnish our readers with a few specimens of those parts of Mr. Sampson's journal which may be termed his comments or experiences. And therefore, without further preface, we quote the following extracts:

"Parliament being over, most of the beggars are going out of town to make the round of the country-seats of the nobility and gentry. A great many of them are dressed like old soldiers or sailors; and they are all well provided with lists of those houses and estates where military or naval officers dwell. Be it observed that before the beggars go out into the country upon these expeditions, they meet at certain cadgers'-haunts, low lodging-houses, or boozing-kens in London, and exchange information as to what country-seats are good to call at. Because as the same parties cannot call twice at the same place during the season, they lose nothing by giving each other such information. In fact, it is a constant practice with beggars to compare notes in this manner. When once out in the country in autumn, they remain out while the hareskin time is on; because while buying and selling hareskins they are able to pass away a great quantity of bad money.

"Women hire infants for fourpence or sixpence a day each, and make at least five shillings a day by carrying them about, — particularly if a woman hires two children at the same time and represents them as twins.

"There are some beggars who know every good house in the country. Some who go the highfly, or play the part of broken-down gentlemen, manage to make ten or fifteen pounds a week. Sometimes they take drawings with them, which they present to the ladies whom they see at parlour windows, or walking in gardens, or on lawns, at country-seats, leaving the reward to their generosity. Sometimes they bribe gentlemen's servants to take in their begging letters, and just throw in any little word of commiseration that may assist their case. Just the opposite of these are the beggars that go upon the shallow, — that is, half-naked. They obtain from compassionate persons

quantities of left-off clothes, by which they make as much sometimes as twelve or fifteen shillings per day. This is one of the most lucrative systems of beggary; but it of course succeeds best in the cold weather, when the beggars manage to shiver and shake like aspens, and thus attract a vast amount of sympathy. The system of hawking is also excellent; many small shopkeepers do not make in a day so much as some of these itinerant venders. Take for instance, a pair of knit cotton braces; the hawker buys them at fourpence, and sells them at one shilling and twopence, or at all events a shilling. He puts on the extra halfpence, expecting to be beaten down.

"Beggars not only provide themselves with lists of the residences of benevolent people in town and country, but also have lists of all charitable societies and institutions, to which they constantly apply in the winter, such as for coals, potatoes, etc., which they always sell as soon as obtained for half their value. Women get baby-linen, tickets of admission to lying-in-hospitals, etc., all of which they immediately sell for what they can get.

"Of an evening in London, the beggars meet at their favourite haunts, where they eat and drink of the best. At night they generally stay indoors and get drunk; but a few of them dress themselves out in decent style and go to the cheap concerts or to low gaming-houses. In Petticoat Lane, Whitechapel, there are several low gaming-houses, kept by Jews; and as it is chiefly here that the beggars sell the clothes which they obtain when out on the shallow, so it is hither they come to lose their ill-got money again at the gaming-table. Nearly all the Jews in Petticoat Lane are receivers of stolen goods, or fences; one or two of them keep fence-shops up at the West End as branch establishments, and even sometimes send large quantities of stolen property abroad. There are a great many publicans who buy stolen property, and then sell it again at a profit to the Jew fences. Some of these Jews go into the country once or twice a year, travel from town to town, and sell to country-dealers the plunder of the metropolis. There are many Christian jewellers and silversmiths who buy property direct from thieves; and it is common enough with refiners, who never ask any questions at all. The wealthiest Jew fences have

agents, and are themselves but seldom seen in the transactions.

"Another dangerous class of persons who profit by the crimes which they do not directly commit themselves are the putters-up of burglaries; and these are very often marine-store dealers, or else flashy-looking fellows frequenting public-houses. This latter class is specially dangerous; they get hold of servant girls who come to fetch the beer, pretend to court them, worm out of them the secrets of the houses to which they belong, and then give the requisite information to the cracksmen or burglars. Livery servants are frequently putters-up of burglaries. The cracksman or burglar generally dresses shabby, like a distressed tradesman; they remain all day in low public-houses or boozing-kens, drinking or playing at skittles.

"At the bottom of Red Lion Street, Clerkenwell, is Capel Court; and there lives a blacksmith who makes housebreakers' implements. Cracksmen go to him and give their orders; he tells them when the implements will be ready, and appoints to meet them at some boozing-ken, perhaps quite in another part of London. The sum agreed upon is paid at this interview; and the blacksmith hands over a brown paper parcel, containing all the implements, stating that the packet has just come up from the country."

Having thus afforded our readers a specimen of Mr. Larry Sampson's diary, we will now return to the Hangman, whom we left busily engaged in consulting those entries and statements which specially regarded himself and the members of the gang to which he belonged.

He was still deep in his somewhat unpleasant though interesting studies, when the thought suddenly floated to his mind that he was incurring a great risk of detention by prolonging his intrusion in the privacy of the officer's sanctum. He therefore resolved to beat a precipitate retreat; and closing the book, he stole forth from the room, shut the door behind him, relocked it by means of the skeleton key which had ere now opened it, and then crept stealthily down-stairs into the breakfast-parlour.

Fortunate indeed was it that he took this step just at the moment; for scarcely had he seated himself in the parlour, when Dame Margery made her appearance.

"Mr. Sampson," she said, "has this moment sent up

from Bow Street to inform me that he shall not be home to dinner, and indeed that I must not expect to see him before the evening, as some pressing business has transpired to demand his immediate attention elsewhere."

"Oh, very well, ma'am," said Daniel Coffin, inwardly rejoicing to think that he had not been surprised by the old dame up in her master's private room. "Then I needn't wait any longer, and so I'll call another day."

"Who shall I say has been?" inquired the housekeeper.

The Hangman hesitated a moment whether he should give his name; but immediately recollecting that the woman need only describe his personal appearance in order to make her master understand who the visitor was, he said, boldly, "Mr. Dan'el Coffin, of Fleet Lane."

"Ah!" she ejaculated, her looks filling with evident disgust and horror as the mention of that name, striking upon her ear like a pestilence upon the entire frame, revealed to her the fact that she stood in the presence of the public executioner. "Good morning, good morning," she hurriedly observed, as she flew to open the front door with an undisguised longing for the departure of so unwelcome a visitant.

"Good morning, ma'am," said Coffin, not choosing to take any notice of her altered manner; and he issued from the house.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CONSULTATION

It was between eight and nine o'clock in the evening of the same day, that the Hangman knocked at the door of Bencull's dark crib in Mill Street, Jacob's Island. He was no longer apparelled in his Sunday's best, having put off his gala garb on his return from Larry Sampson's house; and he was now attired in his usual coarse and ruffian-looking style.

"Who's there?" demanded the well-known voice of Bencull from within.

"Mr. Dan'el Coffin," was the answer, accompanied by a peculiar whistle.

"All right!" said Bencull; and the next moment the door was opened.

"Anybody here yet?" demanded the Hangman, as he entered the passage of that ominous-looking house.

"No, nobody yet," replied Bencull, as he closed and bolted the street door.

"So much the better," observed Coffin; "because I want to speak to you very particular indeed."

The two men proceeded into the back room which has been described in a previous chapter. Liquor and pipes were produced; and when the glasses were filled and the blue wreaths of the tobacco-smoke were curling upward, Bencull said, "Now, old fellow, what is it?"

"Well, my worthy friend," responded the Hangman, looking moodily solemn and savagely serious as he spoke, "I've made a discovery to-day that regards me, you, everybody pretty nearly that we know, and thousands of folk besides."

"What the devil do you mean, Dan'el?" exclaimed the landlord of the dark crib, taking his pipe from his mouth

and gazing with mingled astonishment and alarm upon his companion.

"Why, I mean that there's a man in existence," replied Coffin, "who for years past has been spreading out a great web until he has covered the whole of London with the invisible meshes. And in the middle of this web does he sit like a sharp, cunning spider; while hundreds of flies are getting entangled in it without knowing it, as one may say, so that this great spider has got nothing to do but to come forth at any moment and seize upon any one of the flies that it fancies for its own precious picking. Or else maybe it will bide its time and pounce upon half a dozen or a dozen at a time, and of course make a terrible smash of them all."

"I say, Dan'el, I can patter flash as well as any cross-cove going," observed Bencull; "but, by jingo, if I can understand a single word of all this gibberish that you've been jabbering. Come now, let's have a bit of English; 'cos why, all that there is Greek to me."

"I can deuced soon explain myself," rejoined the Hangman. "Only fancy that Larry Sampson is this precious great spider, and that all the cross-coves, macers, magsmen, prigs, and cracksmen in London are the flies. Now do you understand me?"

"I begin to do so," answered Bencull; "but only just as a feller has a wacant idea of what he's about just when he's getting sober after a deuced good booze."

"Then listen," said the Hangman. "Larry Sampson has got a thundering big book, divided into three parts. In the first part he puts down the names of all people that the law looks with a suspicious eye upon; and I need hardly tell you that your name and mine ain't omitted. In the second division of the book, there's a list of all the flash cribs, fence-shops, and travellers' houses in London; and again I need hardly say that your establishment isn't forgotten. But what's more, every soul frequenting it is also put down in Larry's book; so there's me to begin with, then Jeremy Humpage, next the Swag Chovey Bloak, then Bob the Durrynacker, the Mushroom Faker, the Highflyer of Fakements, the Buttoner, Nell Gibson, and, in fact, all the select company that honour Mr. Bencull's house with their presence."

" Well, I'm not over and above surprised to hear this," observed the landlord of the dark crib. " Of course Larry Sampson knows all these things; his spies are everywhere — "

" Wait a moment, old fellow," exclaimed Coffin, " and just hear what the third part of this great book says. It's a sort of narrative or journal of all Larry's proceedings, adventures, and enterprises; and what will you think when I tell you that that knife-grinding fellow which we chucked over into the ditch was never drowned at all, but is alive and kicking at this moment."

" No, by jingo! is this true? " cried Bencull, turning deadly pale. " Why, 'tis enough to hang us all! " and he put his hand to his throat, as if he already experienced the unpleasant sensation produced by the contact of a halter.

" I can't be hanged for it, at all events," exclaimed Daniel Coffin, " seeing that I've got the royal pardon safe and sound in my pocket. But you haven't heard quite all yet; for if you are astonished at what I've already told you, I don't know how you'll feel when I tell you that the knife-grinder and Larry Sampson were one and the same person. "

" Nonsense! " ejaculated Bencull, half-starting from his chair, and chucking down his pipe so abruptly upon the table that it broke into a dozen pieces. " You are either mad or drunk, Dan'el. Which the devil is it? "

" Neither, you fool," answered the Hangman, with one of his characteristic growls. " What I tell you is true; and more than that, I have read in the great book sufficient to show me that Larry Sampson is acquainted with the secrets of nearly the whole lot of cross-coves in London."

" But why doesn't he take us up by hundreds, and have us hung by twenties at a time? " asked Bencull, gathering courage from the reflection which prompted the query.

" Why, don't you see," exclaimed Coffin, impatiently, " that there's a wide deal of difference between knowing all these kind of things, and being able to get together the necessary evidence to convict a chap at the Old Bailey. But you do see that Larry is constantly nabbing fellows under extraordinary circumstances. Look how he ferrets them out, traces their whole proceedings, follows them, as one may say, step by step, from the moment they plan a crime till the instant it is completed, brings the whole mass

of evidence to burst like a storm around them, and sends them to the scaffold at last. Don't you see this constantly being done, I say? And isn't it often a matter of wonder how Larry does contrive to bring things home to people? Well, then, now it ceases to be a matter of wonder, after all that I have seen and learned to-day."

The Hangman then proceeded to inform his friend Bencull how he had penetrated into Larry Sampson's private apartment, and how he had beheld there all the costumes and other accessories for an infinite variety of complete disguises. Bencull was as much amazed and as thoroughly petrified with wonder at hearing this recital as Coffin himself had been when first entering that mysterious apartment at Sampson's house. Indeed, several minutes elapsed ere Bencull could recover in the slightest degree from that stupor into which he was thus plunged.

"Well, there is one thing I can't understand," he said, at length, when he had lighted another pipe and taken a few whiffs. "How was it that within an hour after Larry Sampson escaped from the ditch behind this house he did not have you and me and all the others taken up and lodged in Newgate at once?"

"Oh, I can understand his reason full well," returned the Hangman. "You was one of the party that did that job with the prince and Marquis of Leveson at Beechey Manor."

"Well, what of that?" exclaimed Bencull.

"Only that Larry Sampson, as it appears by his book, was employed to sift that affair to the bottom," continued Daniel Coffin; "and the better to follow out his researches, he took the disguise of a knife-grinder, first going down to Richmond to make inquiries there, and then coming down here. Now, if he had handed us all over to justice, he would have had to say why he came to the dark crib, so as to make out his tale; and that would have been to tell on what special service he was engaged at the time, and consequently to proclaim to the whole world what had happened to the prince and the Marquis of Leveson on a certain memorable night. But as neither the prince nor the marquis wanted it known at all, but, on the contrary, had certain reasons of their own for wishing it to be kept deuced quiet, Larry Sampson thought it best to hold his peace about his adventure down here."

"Well, all this may be likely enough," said Bencull; "but still it's quite clear that Larry knows a great deal more than is convenient. And now I recollect, the night when he was down here disguised as a knife-grinder, he went upstairs and saw old Jeremy Humpage — "

"Well, well," interrupted the Hangman; "never mind anything about the details of what happened on that particular night. What we have chiefly to think about at present is whether we are to take any step to ensure our safety for the future."

"In what way?" asked Bencull, with that kind of ominously significant look which showed that he had caught an inkling of the idea then uppermost in the Hangman's mind. "Come, speak out, Dan'el; you and me are old pals, and can trust each other."

"Then my mind is made up as to Larry Sampson," answered Coffin. "It's quite clear that no business is to be done in future with any degree of safety, as long as Larry is alive. He has got a halter around your neck, and around the necks of all our pals and confederates, and he won't be long before he gets one around my neck again also. And when it is considered that he can pull these halters tight at any moment he chooses, by Satan! to make away with such a fellow would be conferring a blessing on the whole fraternity."

"You and me, Dan'el," observed Bencull, jerking his pipe toward the back of the house, "have shoved out more than one stiff 'un into the black ditch; and therefore I don't see why we should hesitate in making a croaker of Mr. Larry Sampson."

"To be sure not, and it shall be done!" cried the Hangman. "But we must also take measures to get possession of his book at the same time that we do his business for him; or else, if that great volume fell into the hands of another officer, it would soon put him into the right way of becoming as knowing, and consequently as dangerous, as Larry Sampson himself."

"Well, have you got any scheme in your head?" demanded Bencull.

"Larry Sampson must be enticed down here," said the Hangman, "by some means or another; and while you and two or three of our most trustworthy pals are doing his

business for him, I will call at his house in Long Acre on some pretence and get possession of the great book."

"Well and good," said Bencull. "But how the deuce do you hope to entice Larry to trust himself again in the dark crib?"

"Cunning as he is, let us see if we can't be more cunning still. What think you of planting some woman upon him to make him believe that through revenge she wants to betray a scheme in which her flash man is engaged? This looks so devilish nat'ral, if we could only get a blowen of the right sort to carry it out."

"What say you to Nell Gibson?" demanded Bencull. "She's the most artfullest gal which I ever happened to be acquainted with, besides which, she's got such a way of looking so precious innocent and sincere when she's really plotting the deepest mischief."

"Yes, we'll make use of Nell Gibson in this matter. But are you quite sure that Nell is the most trustworthy young woman that we could employ in the matter? You know her better than I do."

"Why, my maxim always is never to trust any woman farther than you can see her," replied Bencull; "and therefore it's my advice that while setting Nell Gibson to work against Larry Sampson, we should also set somebody to watch Nell Gibson."

"A very capital plan of yours, old fellow," observed the Hangman. "And now, taking it for granted that Nell Gibson will embark in this business, who shall we plant in turn upon her?"

"Well, of all coveys that ever come to this house," answered Bencull, after a few moments' reflection, "that Buttoner, or thimble-rig feller, is the downiest. Besides which, he's been rayther sweet upon Nell Gibson for some time past; but Nell won't have nothing to say to him because he's down in his luck, and hasn't done overwell lately. If we was only to rig him out with new toggery from head to foot, give him a few cooters to flash about with, and set him up in Swell Street, Nell would precious soon take up with him, 'cos he's not a bad-looking chap by no means."

"Well, I don't mind venturing fifteen or twenty guineas for this part of the business," observed the Hangman;

" and you can therefore make it all right with the Buttoner."

" Agreed," said Bencull.

The Hangman accordingly produced his pocketbook and drew forth bank-notes to the amount of twenty pounds, which he handed to his accomplice; then rising from his seat, he said, " I will go and see Nell Gibson at once. She lives at Mother Young's, don't she? "

" Yes, where that old witch Mother Franklin is," replied Bencull.

" To be sure, — I know all about it. I've been there often enough before. So I'll just go and make it all right with Nell, and will then come back to take another glass with you. Perhaps I shall bring her with me."

Daniel Coffin then quitted the dark crib.

CHAPTER XXIV

NELL GIBSON

TURNING abruptly out of Mill Street into the narrow passage that went shelving down toward the black ditch, the Hangman hastily traversed the rickety old wooden bridge, pausing only for an instant to cast a look down on that stagnant water, the surface of which seemed like black marble as the feeble moonlight played upon it. Cutting straight through the fearful rookery constituting Jacob's Island, he passed over another bridge on the farther side, and at once plunged into the maze of vile, narrow, dark, and filthy streets in the immediate vicinage.

In a few minutes Daniel Coffin reached a street somewhat wider and to all appearances more respectable than the rest; and presently he paused at a house whose shutters, blinds, and door were all green. A subdued light shone forth from every window, and the sounds of several female voices emanated from the front room on the ground floor. The Hangman knocked at the door, which was opened by a very stout, red-faced woman of fifty. She was dressed in a shabby black silk gown; a faded neckerchief, that once had displayed the gaudiest colours, was thrown over her immense shoulders; and a dirty cap, adorned with tawdry ribbons, was set awry upon her head, either through a lingering sentiment of coquetry which had not deserted her though she had fallen into the sear and yellow leaf, or else for the less romantic reason of having been thrust aside in some scuffle. She wore a false front to conceal the hair which years of debauchery had tended even more than time to rob of its pristine darkness; the tip of her nose was rubicund and shining, and if any other evidence had been wanting to prove her devotion to the bottle, it might have

been perceived in the strong odour of the juniper which infected her breath. A trumpery mosaic chain hung around her great thick neck; and two or three flaring rings of base metal, set with great pieces of coloured glass, were stuck upon her very dirty fingers.

She held a candle in her hand; and the moment the light fell upon the Hangman's countenance she exclaimed, "Ah! Mr. Coffin is that you? Well, I raly am delighted to see you alive again, after hearing as how you was dead and feeding the fishes in the Thames. But, howsomever, you are not looking the wuss for your late adventures."

"Not a bit, mother; they did me good, on the contrary," observed the Hangman, with a low chuckle, and with as amiable a look as such a hangdog countenance as his own could possibly assume; "besides which, you see, I've resumed office at the Old Bailey again."

"I read all about it, Mr. Coffin, in the newspapers," returned the woman; "and I was struck all of a heap when I seed how sudden you turned up again. But I hope," she added, with a leering smile of coarse familiarity, "that if so be I should come to Tuck-up Fair to dance upon nothing, you'll treat me as a lady should be treated at a gentleman's hands."

"That I will, mother," exclaimed Coffin, with a laugh which almost sounded ominous to the woman's ears, and made her repent of her joke as it sent a shudder coldly quivering through her frame. "Depend upon it that if ever you come to be taught the fall of a leaf in the Old Bailey, I'll make the hempen neckcloth as comfortable for your old neck as possible; and I'll let the drop fall so gentle under your feet that you shall slide down as easy as a boy off a haystack."

"Well, come in, come in, Mr. Coffin," said Mrs. Young, somewhat impatiently, as if she had had quite enough of that terrible tragi-comic jesting. "Come in, I say, and wash your mouth out with a drop of summat short."

Thus speaking, the woman led the way into the little front parlour, where an immense fire blazed in the grate, giving forth a stifling heat. Huddled together on an old faded rickety sofa sat four young women, whose faces highly coloured with rouge, shameless exposure of the bosom, and immodest looks, but too plainly announced their avocation. Lounging in an armchair near the fire sat

Nell Gibson, with one of her feet upon an old footstool, and the other resting upon the hob, while her form was thrown back with a lascivious abandonment mingled with reckless indolence. She was, however, dressed more neatly and carefully than the girls upon the sofa, whose apparel was a mixture of poverty-stricken meanness and scantiness, disguised and embellished as much as possible by tawdry finery. But Nell Gibson wore a good stuff dress, cut very low in front so as to display the really fine bust which had not yet entirely lost the first freshness of youth. Her arms, too, were bare, but they were plump and white; the hands were not only well made, but also scrupulously clean; and her well-shaped legs were provided with clean white stockings and a new pair of shoes. In fine, this young woman was altogether of a beauty that shone in remarkable contrast with the faded forms and worn-out looks of the girls upon the sofa. For, alas! although these latter females were still but mere girls as to age, yet were they old women, yes, old, old women in sad experience, and also in the waste and ruin of those charms which, even at the age of one or two and twenty, required cosmetics to conceal the ravages of dissipation.

Having paid his respects to Nell Gibson and the other females, the Hangman desired Mrs. Young to produce a couple of bottles of wine; and as he threw down a guinea at the same moment, the woman bustled about with alacrity to give the necessary order. An old harridan of nearly ninety, bent double with age, and who had passed the whole of her long life in houses of crime, acted as Mrs. Young's servant; and she was accordingly despatched to the nearest public-house to fetch the wine. When she returned and placed the bottles upon the table, the Hangman exclaimed, in a bantering tone, "Halloa! Mother Franklin, are you still alive?"

"Yes, you see I be," answered the old hag, wagging her toothless jaws with a merry laugh.

"Why, how old are you now, you witch?" demanded the Hangman.

"Eighty-nine, come next Febiverry," responded the hag; "and you'll never reach that age, Mr. Coffin, for you're doomed to go out of the world in the same way as you've helped a many others to quit it," and she laughed with a hideous cackling sound that presently merged into a choking

cough which brought the scalding rheum into her bleared eyes.

"By Satan!" exclaimed Coffin, ferociously, "I shall have the satisfaction of tucking you up before I die, you infernal old beldam! Why, I don't believe you were ever in a respectable house in your life!"

"That's true enough," answered the hag, with her horrible chuckle. "I was born in such a house as this, I was bred in it, I became prematurely old in it," she continued, glancing significantly toward the girls upon the sofa. "I have been the child of crime, the mother of crime, and the widow of crime; and now I may say I am the great-great-grandmother of crime. Lord bless ye, you won't see one in a thousand, no, nor yet one in a million, that comes to my age after passing all one's life in such houses as this here. They mostly die in ditches, or on dunghills, or in hospitals or workhouses, long, long before they come to even half my age."

"Hold your tongue, you old witch!" ejaculated Nell Gibson, half-starting from her chair in a rage. "I declare if you're allowed to let your tongue run on like this, I'll leave the house."

"It's shameful to let Mother Franklin talk just as she likes," observed the young females upon the sofa; but they did not threaten to leave the house, for they were entirely in Mrs. Young's power; whereas Nell Gibson was totally independent of the woman.

"There, take that, you old beldam, and be off!" said the Hangman, savagely, tossing her a shilling.

Mother Franklin, who had thrown a look of diabolical spite upon Nell Gibson when she threatened to leave the house, now fastened the same malignant look upon the Hangman, muttering to herself, "What! only a shilling, a beggarly shilling, for fetching that wine and standing all this abuse!" Then suddenly picking up the coin, she bustled out of the room, laughing with that hideous laugh which was between a cackle and a cough.

The Hangman, perceiving that he had just drawn the ancient harridan into a conversation which had thrown a damp upon the spirits of those present, hastened to pour out the wine and pass around the glasses, the contents of which were speedily disposed of. The girls upon the sofa

were specially prompt in emptying their glasses, and they looked particularly satisfied when Mr. Coffin refilled them. Then, after chatting on various subjects for about a quarter of an hour, the Hangman said to Nell Gibson, "I want to speak to you upon very particular business."

She looked at him for a moment with a strange gaze, in which astonishment, indignation, and disgust were all clearly and plainly blended; then, suddenly bursting out into a loud laugh, she said, "No, Mr. Coffin, any living soul but the public executioner."

"What does the girl mean?" growled the Hangman, his countenance all of a sudden assuming a look of diabolical ferocity; but the next moment, recollecting that it was his policy to conciliate instead of angering Ellen Gibson, he said, in as mild a tone as it was in his nature to adopt, "I didn't mean any tender proposal, Nell; but it's on a matter of business I want to speak to you, and so if you'll just put on your bonnet and shawl and step out with me, we can chat as we walk up and down the street; or may be you would step around as far as Bencull's for half an hour or so."

"No, I don't want to go out to-night," said Nell; "it's raw and damp, and I've got a cold. But we can talk here," and she made a sign to Mother Young and the four girls, who all took the hint accordingly and quitted the room. "Now, then, what is it?" inquired the young woman, still retaining her indolent attitude as she lolled in the armchair near the fire.

"And so you wouldn't have accepted me as your lover?" said the Hangman, with a jocose look, as he really began to feel somewhat excited by the provoking abandonment of the young woman's fine person in that attitude of indolent wantonness.

"Faugh! there is a smell about you as if you had been touching dead bodies," replied Nell, who was of a very independent spirit and did not mind saying what she thought. Indeed, vile, depraved, remorseless prostitute as she was, and ready also to sell herself to even the most disgusting old men so long as she was adequately paid, she nevertheless recoiled in unfeigned loathing and aversion from the idea of such contact with the public executioner.

"Well, at all events, you are candid, Nell," said Daniel Coffin, after a brief pause, during which he bit his lip almost

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till the blood came, so desperate for a moment was his vexation at the disgust with which the young woman regarded him. "But come, it's no use for you and me to wrangle while there's business to be done; so I suppose we are all good friends again?"

"To be sure," answered Nell, instantaneously recovering her good humour; "so long as you don't talk to me in a particular way, we shall be the best friends in the world, as we always have been hitherto; and if there's anything to be done in which my services can be made handy, you know very well that you can command me."

"I am glad to hear you speak in this sensible way," said Coffin, laying aside all his recent resentment, "because there really is something important on hand. You recollect that night, down at the dark crib, when you enticed a young lady there —"

"To be sure; and she had plenty of trinkets and a well-filled purse," exclaimed Nell, "out of all which we were shamefully bilked. But what of her?"

"Oh, nothing about her; but you remember that rascally knife-grinding fellow that undertook to send her into kingdom-come?"

"As if it was possible to forget that man whom we sent to sleep at the bottom of the black ditch," said the young woman, her tone and her looks both suddenly becoming serious.

"Yes, but what will you think," exclaimed the Hangman, "when I tell you that the fellow does not sleep at the bottom of the black ditch at all, but, on the contrary, must have been awoke into consciousness and life when plunged into that slimy pool? And what else will you think when I tell you that not only is that knife-grinder safe and sound in the land of the living, but that he is none other than our mortal enemy Larry Sampson?"

With a surprise that rapidly increased into a speechless wonderment did Nell Gibson hear the announcements thus made by Daniel Coffin; and even before she could so far recover from this stupefaction as to be able to give utterance to a word, did the Hangman proceed to recite the same account as he had already given to Bencull concerning his visit to Larry Sampson's house and the discoveries he had made through the agency of the great book. We need hardly

say that Nell Gibson's surprise soon became commingled with alarm and dismay; for there were many episodes in her career which she had hitherto fancied to be utterly unsuspected by the myrmidons of justice, but which, from what the Hangman now told her, were indeed too well known to Larry Sampson. It was true that, save and except her share in the attempt to murder the officer when disguised as a knife-grinder, there was no enormous crime which could positively and unquestionably be brought home to her; otherwise, perhaps, Larry would not have allowed her to remain at large so long. But it was quite clear that he knew more about her than was pleasant to be thus known, and that such knowledge of her antecedents would render her future career an object of constant suspicion and surveillance, thereby planting, as it were, a thousand hidden dangers in her way.

When, therefore, the Hangman proposed that she should embark in some enterprise the aim of which was nothing less than the murder of the Bow Street officer, she experienced no compunction in giving a prompt and even cheerful assent to the scheme. Coffin then proceeded to develop his views, in the discussion of which the extraordinary keenness and astuteness of the young woman afforded no inconsiderable help, leading to many practical suggestions of importance to the infernal project. Finally, after a lengthened deliberation, the Hangman and Nell Gibson came to a complete understanding together; and the former, taking leave of Mother Young's establishment, returned to the dark crib in Jacob's Island, to report to Bencull the success of his mission.

But little did either Daniel Coffin or Nell Gibson suspect that throughout their private interview and important colloquy, old Mother Franklin, the toothless harridan belonging to Mrs. Young's establishment, had been listening eagerly and breathlessly at the keyhole of the parlour door.

CHAPTER XXV

VENETIA AND HER ADMIRERS

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the occurrences just related, and it was now the middle of November, — that month of short days and dark fogs in which Englishmen are reputed to show a greater predilection for suicide than at any other season of the year.

On the particular evening of which we are about to write, the prince regent was entertaining at his dinner-table Lord and Lady Sackville, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and the Earl of Curzon. The reader will therefore perceive that it was quite a select little party; and Venetia, being the only lady present, was of course compelled to render herself as agreeable as possible. We were wrong, however, to use the word compelled, because the beautiful creature possessed that admirable tact, ladylike discernment, and natural flow of spirits which always enabled her to be affable and agreeable without an effort; and the spells of fascination seemed to belong as naturally to her manners as loveliness hung like a charm upon her person, or as the sweetest and richest melody poured itself forth in the tones of her voice.

It will be remembered that the Earl of Curzon had cherished a great deal of animosity toward Venetia, not only for having rejected his advances, but also for having bestowed her hand upon Horace Sackville; and the reader may likewise suppose that Venetia, on her side, did not immediately forget the cowardly threats which the earl had held forth when he visited her at Acacia Cottage, or the malignant irony of his manner when he congratulated her immediately after the ceremony at St. George's, Hanover Square. But when Horace and Venetia became not only Lord and Lady Sackville, but also took up their quarters at Carlton House

and were at once admitted by the acclamation of the whole fashionable world to be the idols of the day, no sooner, we say, were the newly married couple thus elevated on so lofty a pedestal, than the Earl of Curzon was one of the first to pay his court to them. For he felt that to be at war with Horace and Venetia would amount to total exclusion from the banquets, the balls, and the soirées at Carlton House; and to such exclusion the earl's vanity would not permit him to submit. Swallowing, therefore, his resentment and putting the best possible face upon the matter, he had hastened to make his peace with the Sackvilles; and they had succeeded too well in their ambitious projects not to be able to afford forgiveness in this respect. Indeed, it had become a part of the conventional tactics of Horace and Venetia not to make enemies if they could prevent it, and to disarm all existing hostilities, so as to afford as little impulse as possible to the ill-natured things which were certain to be said relative to individuals who had experienced so sudden and remarkable an elevation to rank, fortune, and power.

The Earl of Curzon was a consummate hypocrite when it suited his purpose to act with duplicity; and no sooner had he made his peace with the Sackvilles when he became most fervid in his demonstrations of friendship toward them. He made Lord Sackville a present of a splendid horse; and he now and then sent Venetia beautiful bouquets of flowers, the newly published prints, and such gifts as a gentleman may without indiscretion proffer to a lady. All this he did without any obtrusiveness or any apparently interested motive; his visits were not more frequent than they ought to be, and he invariably behaved with the most courteous respect toward Lady Sackville. The result was that his past conduct was at length pretty well forgotten; and though he was not perhaps regarded in the light of a friend, he at all events was considered as a very intimate acquaintance.

And now a word or two with regard to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Upwards of a fortnight had elapsed since that memorable evening on which the baronet and Venetia had met in the anteroom leading to the saloon where the aristocratic young ladies had made a pastime of dancing and throwing flowers around the prince. During this fortnight Sir Douglas, emboldened by the encouragement which

Venetia appeared to give him upon that occasion, had become a more frequent visitor at the suite of apartments which she and Horace occupied at Carlton House; and it is quite certain that he received no discouragement on the part of Venetia. On the contrary, she always managed to be " at home " to him; and when he took his leave of her on each occasion, she generally contrived to give him a hint as to the most convenient hour for him to call the next day. At the outset of these visits, he had ventured to press her hand to his lips; and the chiding he received was so gentle that it did not prevent him from snatching a kiss from the damask cheek. At the next visit, therefore, — as this boldness on his part had excited but a moderate degree of resentment, — he was venturous enough to cull the sweets of her delicious mouth. This liberty experienced no very cruel chastisement, and therefore Sir Douglas felt himself justified in cherishing the fervid hope that ere long these little favours which he obtained in detail would be crowned by the complete surrender of the fortress.

Thus stood matters at the time specified at the opening of this chapter; namely, on that evening in the middle of November when we thus find the Sackvilles, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon dining with the prince regent.

It was about nine o'clock, the dessert had just been placed upon the table, and the wine was beginning to circulate pretty freely, save with respect to Venetia herself. Nevertheless, a little champagne which she had taken at dinner, and the glass of fine old port which she was just sipping now had slightly enhanced the bloom upon her cheeks, deepening it into a richer carnation, while her beautiful blue eyes appeared to swim in a more softly sensuous and melting languor. Delicious, too, was the dewy moisture of those lips which seemed to invite the tenderest kisses, and to be able to give them back again; and as the lustre of the lamps shone upon her rich auburn hair, crowning her with light and setting forth the grandeur of her forehead in all its alabaster purity, she appeared to be one of those beings who can only have an ideal existence in the verse of the poet or the page of the novelist.

It was about half-past nine when a footman entered and whispered something in the ear of the prince.

"Show his lordship up immediately," exclaimed his Royal Highness, aloud. Then, so soon as the servant had retired, he observed, "It is Leveson, who has just come back from Paris; and, as a matter of course, he will be welcome amongst us."

"Oh, assuredly!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "But what did he go to Paris for?"

"Ah! that, I suppose, is his secret," replied the prince, who, however, knew full well wherefore the marquis had gone so suddenly abroad more than a month previously, and why he had remained so long in the French capital.

The Marquis of Leveson now made his appearance; and when the usual greetings and complimentary phrases were exchanged, he took a seat on the left hand of the prince,—Venetia being on the right of his Royal Highness. The conversation was continued upon general subjects for some time; but presently when Lord Sackville, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon had become involved in a warm though friendly discussion upon some moot-point, to which Venetia was listening with great interest, the prince and the Marquis of Leveson seized the opportunity to exchange a few hurried and whispered observations.

"What news?" inquired the prince.

"Did you not receive letters from me yesterday, stating that I should be home to-day?" asked Leveson.

"Yes," replied the prince. "And nothing, I suppose, is changed since the date at which you wrote those letters?"

"Nothing," returned the marquis. "As you are aware, Julia Owen has gone on to rejoin her sisters in Italy —"

"Yes, that I know well enough," interrupted the prince; "and she must have reached them by this time. Why, it is a fortnight since you despatched her from Paris, on the failure of that precious affair between her and the falsely styled Jocelyn Loftus."

At the mention of this name, which caught Venetia's ear, she gave a start, though it was unperceived by any one present. Then, while apparently continuing to listen with interest to the discussion between her husband, the earl, and the baronet, she in reality lent an earnest and attentive ear to the whispered and confidential discourse that was going on between the prince regent and the Earl of Leveson. The latter proceeded to make certain observations relative

to Jocelyn Loftus, which revealed to the ears of Venetia a remarkable secret in connection with that young gentleman, showing to her how it was that the prince had ere now spoken of him as the falsely styled Jocelyn Loftus.

But why is Venetia interested in aught that concerns Jocelyn Loftus? Does she know him? Has she ever seen him? In a word, wherefore has her heart begun to flutter like a frightened bird in its cage, and why does it need all her resolution, all her firmness, all her presence of mind to prevent the betrayal of those emotions which the mention of this name has suddenly excited within her bosom?

We cannot answer these questions at present; and therefore must we pursue, without delay, the thread of our narrative.

"And is he still in the prefecture?" inquired the prince, continuing the whispered discourse with Leveson, while Venetia was straining every sense to catch each word that passed between them.

"Yes," returned the marquis. "What else could possibly be done with him? He is proof against all temptation; his virtue would put the old Stoic philosophers to shame; and if he were set at large he would blow to the winds all that fine scheme which, if successful, will relieve you from the trammels of your accursed marriage."

"But will the French government consent to retain him a prisoner much longer?" asked the prince. "Seeing that the pretext is so shallow, I fear lest it should be under the necessity of setting him at liberty."

"Not at all," returned the marquis. "King Louis acknowledges his obligation to succour your Royal Highness to the utmost of his power, and he pledged himself to me to do so."

"Then the imprisonment of that mad-brained, obstinate young man is likely to be prolonged indeed?" said the prince. "But what have you done with that beautiful Louisa Stanley of whom you wrote to me in such glaring colours?"

"Would you believe it, sir, I have brought her back from Paris and managed to entice her to Albemarle Street," said the marquis, with a leer of most sensual satisfaction.

"Do you mean to say that you have already won that prize?" asked the prince.

"No, no, not yet. I have been playing the paternal,

and she looks up to me quite as a father. She has got a sister somewhere in London; but she has evidently mistaken the address of this sister's residence. However, I will tell you all about this another time; suffice it to say that Louisa is a charming creature, and I have obtained such influence over — "

The whispered dialogue between the prince and the marquis, and the animated discussion on the part of Sackville, Curzon, and Huntingdon, were both alike interrupted at this particular moment by the circumstance of Venetia suddenly upsetting her wine-glass by a too abrupt movement which she made; and as the wine was spilt upon the rich satin dress that she wore, she started from her seat, evidently much confused and chagrined at an accident which had drawn all eyes upon her. Then faltering forth a few words of apology, she hurried from the room.

Hastening to her own chamber, she threw herself upon the sofa and fell into a profound reverie. Painful it no doubt was, for her troubled spirit seemed to look through the eyes that were bent down fixedly, beaming not with a voluptuous languor now. Painful, too, that reverie was, because the colour had fled from her cheeks and an unrelieved pallor sat upon her countenance. Presently she pressed her hand forcibly to her heart, as if to still its throbbings; and that superb bosom which was wont to swell so warmly and glowingly with amorous emotions now appeared to palpitate beneath the empire of other and far different thoughts.

But suddenly starting from the sofa, she assumed a look of forced composure, — that look which an energetic woman puts on when, in the presence of dangers, difficulties, or annoyances suddenly starting up before her, she resolves to adopt a decisive course. Ringing the bell to summon her faithful attendant Jessica, Venetia hastened to put off the soiled dress and array herself in another robe. Then, ere she quitted the chamber, she said to Jessica, " You must hasten up to Stratton Street at once, and tell Miss Bathurst that it is probable inquiries may be made for a certain person and that she must be upon her guard accordingly. Whisper this much in Miss Bathurst's ear; or if Miss Bathurst should not happen to be at home, tell it to Mrs. Arbuthnot, and the meaning of the message will be thoroughly understood."

Having given these instructions, Lady Sackville descended

to the saloon belonging to the suite of apartments which she and her husband occupied at Carlton House; and after remaining there for a short time, until she had entirely regained an outward appearance of calmness as well as some of the lost carnation hues upon her cheeks, she rang the bell and ordered her serious-looking valet, who answered the summons, to go and inform his Royal Highness and his guests that she should be happy to see them to take coffee with her.

Half an hour afterward, the prince, the marquis, the earl, and the baronet, accompanied, of course, by Lord Sackville himself, repaired to the saloon where Venetia was thus awaiting their presence; and as the company partook of the fragrant coffee and the choice liqueurs which followed she conversed as gaily and as cheerfully as if she had experienced no sudden paroxysm of low spirits during the entire evening.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had seated himself next to her at the tea-table; and the influence of the wine he had drunk, mingling with that of her transcendent charms and the melody of her fluid voice, filled him with a species of delirious intoxication which rendered all control of his feelings a matter of utter impossibility. Availing himself, therefore, of a moment when no one else observed him, and hurried along by an irresistible current of ecstatic emotions, he whispered, "By Heaven! Venetia, you are adorable to-night! O for one hour of your love, and I would cheerfully resign all the remainder of my existence to enjoy it."

"Are you serious, and would you do me a great — a very great service?" she inquired, in a low, deep whisper, accompanying her words by a look which seemed to blend a profound earnestness of purpose with a tender intimation that she was willing to pay the highest price which woman can give for the service to which she had just alluded.

"Tell me what I can do for you, adorable being," murmured the enraptured baronet, "and I will peril my life in your service."

Venetia threw a hurried glance around; and perceiving that this rapid and whispered colloquy at the tea-table was still unobserved, she darted a sudden look of vivid intelligence upon the baronet, saying, in an equally hurried but low-breathed tone at the same time, "I will write presently upon

a slip of paper that which I should blush to say in your presence."

Having thus given a sort of promise to which the baronet instantaneously attached the tenderest and most delicious interpretation, Venetia rose from her seat; and crossing the room, she threw herself upon a sofa at the farther end, as if to get as far as possible from the heat of the very large fire that was blazing in the grate.

The Earl of Curzon now approached her, and negligently taking a seat by her side, he began to converse upon a variety of those topics which make up the sum of fashionable discourse. But Venetia was preoccupied with other and more important matters, so that at times she fell into a pensive mood, from which she would suddenly start and then gaze upon the earl with a look of vacant inquiry, as if in wonder at what he had been saying. In fact, there was altogether a peculiarity in her manner which she could not control, and which she even rendered more strange by attempting to subdue it, or to repair the awkwardness of its effects.

Now the Earl of Curzon had been drinking freely; and the wine had produced upon him a certain excitement which the magic of Venetia's charms speedily enhanced to an almost frenzied degree. Thus, losing his head, as it were, in the fumes of the generous grape and in the intoxicating influences of his own desires, he mistook that peculiarity of Venetia's manner for the embarrassment and confusion attendant upon a favourable feeling experienced toward himself. His vanity assisted this belief; and thus blindly abandoning himself to it, he ventured to touch Venetia's hand with a significant tenderness. She perceived the circumstance and threw upon him a glance which was about to shoot forth the fires of indignation, when all in a moment the truth flashed to her mind. She remembered that her manner had been strange and preoccupied, and this recollection furnished her with the key to the mystery of the earl's conduct. Yes, it was quite clear; he fancied she was in love with him, and that all the last half-hour's absence of mind and preoccupation were the proofs of this affection on her part.

Thus was it that the sudden flashing of the truth to her comprehension checked the indignation which her looks were about to pour forth upon the earl; and at the same moment

another thought sprang up in her mind. But this second thought was of importance to herself, suggestive as it was of a means by which she could render the earl serviceable in certain matters upon which she had this night resolved.

Suffering, therefore, her hand to remain in contact with his own, she bent upon him a look into which she threw as much tenderness and encouragement as she dared without incurring the risk of being deemed too ready to accept his overtures and too willing to fling herself into his arms.

"Have you forgiven me for the insolence of my conduct on the first day of our acquaintance?" he inquired, in a low voice.

"Most assuredly," she softly answered. "Has not my conduct proved this much?"

"Ah! if I dared to hope," murmured the earl, with a sigh.

"If I were to bid you hope," whispered Venetia, after a few instants' pause, and speaking as if in obedience to the sudden impulse of a feeling stronger than herself, "would you be ready to perform any service which I might demand?"

"Did you order me to kill myself at your feet as a proof of my devotion," responded the earl, transported with raptures and incredulous even to the amount of that happiness which the present discourse inspired, "I would do it unhesitatingly — oh, unhesitatingly this moment!"

"And you swear by your God, and by your honour as a man," whispered Venetia, earnestly and even solemnly, "that you will keep secret whatever may pass between us?"

"I will, I will," answered the earl. "I would sooner die than deceive you."

Venetia appeared satisfied with this reply; for her looks brightened up, and she threw upon the nobleman a glance of mingled gratitude and tenderness. Then, after reflecting deeply for a few moments, she said, "I cannot tell you more now, but presently I will slip a note into your hand."

Having given the earl this assurance, which seemed to promise joys and favours that should crown him with a triumph and a bliss which even an hour before appeared to be not merely incalculably remote but scarcely probable or possible at all, having thus breathed those honeyed words of hope, we say, Venetia rose from the sofa and advanced toward the prince and the others who were standing in a group

before the fire and conversing upon some animated topic of politics.

But as Venetia thus drew near, that topic, usually considered to be so unwelcome to ladies, was instantly abandoned; and the prince, fixing his eyes upon his beautiful mistress, said, " Is your ladyship inclined to favour us with music, or are we to betake ourselves to cards? "

" I am somewhat indisposed this evening, sir," answered Venetia, " and cannot sing. Indeed, it is my intention to retire early; but if you will agree to amuse yourselves with cards, I am sure that Horace will himself make you a bowl of curaçoa punch according to that receipt which you have all on former occasions pronounced to be so fine. I presume your Royal Highness does not wish us to stand on ceremony? " added Venetia, with one of her most winning and fascinating smiles; " and no one beyond these walls need know that the lord steward of the regent's household condescends to manufacture punch."

There was a great deal of laughing and joking at this proposition so good-naturedly and humourously made, and we need hardly say that it was at once accepted. The prince, the marquis, the earl, and the baronet sat down to whist, and Lord Sackville retired into his dining-room to make the punch. Thither he was presently followed by Venetia, and as she assured herself that he had every ingredient he required, she observed, in a low tone and with a sudden pouting of her beautiful lips, " After all, I am sorry that I proposed this very inebriating mixture."

" And wherefore? " asked her husband, astonished at the remark.

" Because," she replied, with a downcast look and a glow upon her cheeks, " as I just quitted the saloon, the prince made a sign which I could not but too well understand — "

" Ah! I know what you mean," observed Sackville, biting his lip. " The prince means to pass the night with you."

But the blush almost immediately passed away from Venetia's countenance, and the pang which shot through her husband's heart was only momentary; for the delicacy of feeling which had conjured up the former and produced the latter was almost completely extinguished within their breasts so far as their connection as man and wife was concerned.

Alas! alas! that such dreadful depravity should have prevailed where there was so much beauty, such intelligence and such naturally godlike qualities on either side!

Venetia now left her husband to continue the manufacture of the punch, while she hastened up to her own boudoir; and sitting down to her writing-desk, she penned the following note, which she intended for the Earl of Curzon:

"I promised that I would slip a few lines into your hand, and I keep my word. The reason why I thus commit myself to paper is to furnish you with a proof of my sincerity, so that in return you may hesitate not to render me the great and important service which I require at your hands. Come to me to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock. I will receive you in my boudoir, where we may converse for half an hour without restraint.

"VENETIA."

Having penned this note in her beautiful fluent hand, Lady Sackville took another piece of paper and wrote thereon the following words, intended for Sir Douglas Huntingdon:

"I promised that I would slip a note into your hand this evening, and I keep my word. Yes, I love thee; and I accept thy love in return. The reason why I write these lines is because I can make upon paper that appointment which I should never have dared to breathe with my lips. The punch will be strong; you can affect to be overcome by it, and Sackville will offer you a chamber for the night in our suite of apartments. I shall be alone in my boudoir, the door of which faces the marble statue of Diana in the gallery.

"VENETIA."

Having concluded this second billet, Venetia proceeded to fold each up into the smallest possible compass; and thrusting one into the right bosom of her dress and the other into the left, she returned to the saloon. There she found the card-playing going on and the punch already served around. At that moment, too, the Earl of Curzon was rising from the card-tables to make room for Horace, who accordingly sat down to take a hand in the game; and Venetia now therefore found a speedy opportunity of thrusting one of

the notes into the hand of the Earl of Curzon. This manœuvre was of course unperceived by everybody else; and the earl, after flinging a look expressive of fervid gratitude upon her ladyship, quitted the room.

In a few minutes he returned; and she read in his looks the ineffable delight which filled his soul. She accordingly understood full well that he had sought an opportunity to read her billet, and that he could know not a greater happiness than that of complying with its contents.

In a short time Sir Douglas Huntingdon rose from the table, declaring that "he was in no humour to play at cards to-night:" and the prince regent accordingly desired the Earl of Curzon to join the whist party again. To this request, which was a command when coming from royalty, the nobleman immediately yielded; and Sir Douglas went and placed himself by the side of Venetia, who had taken a chair at some little distance.

Watching her opportunity, when the card-players were most intent on their game, Lady Sackville slipped the other note into the baronet's hand; and soon afterward, it being now past midnight, she retired to her own chamber.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BOUDOIR

On thus retiring to her elegant boudoir, Venetia neither rang immediately for her maid to help her to lay aside her apparel, nor did she commence her night toilet alone; but flinging herself on the sofa near the fire, she gave way to her reflections.

A deep melancholy crept over her, and tears even stole forth upon her long dark lashes; then, as if it were a positive luxury to escape from the hollowness, the falsity, and the demoralization of a court life even for a few minutes, and to indulge in the unrestrained thought which the solitude of her own chamber permitted, she murmured, audibly, " Yes, let me weep, let me weep! "

And Venetia wept, not violently, like the rains pouring forth from an angry heaven to beat down the fairest flowers and crush the sweetest buds of promise, but softly and gently, like the April showers descending with a genial influence to give freshness to nature's expanding verdure in garden, grove, and field. Thus did Venetia's tears fertilize, as it were, her memory and her heart for the time being; and all the tenderest recollections that the former cherished, and all the sweetest feelings of woman's nature which the latter harboured, were revived into freshness and wooed into bloom by the gentle shower that fell from the deep blue heaven of her eyes.

Presently she rose from the sofa, passed behind a low screen which partitioned off one corner of the elegantly furnished boudoir, and opened a splendid bureau or cabinet made of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Thence she took forth her jewel-box; but her eyes shone not with pleasure at the view of the flashing gems which the box

contained. No; for these she recked not now, and the object of her search was nothing more than a small packet of letters tied around with a simple white ribbon. Returning to her seat upon the sofa, Venetia began to examine these letters, which were all written in the same hand, and this hand was a beautiful female one, closely resembling her own fluid and elegant writing.

But as she ran her eyes over certain passages in that correspondence, the tears rained down her cheeks; and at length she wept so copiously that through the half-blinding floods she beheld the paper and the writing on it as through a mist. But this outpouring of her heart's long pent-up feelings proved an immense relief, an incalculable solace; and wiping from her eyes the last pearl-drops which hung upon the long, dark, softly curved lashes, she tied up the packet of letters with the white ribbon and restored them to the jewel-box. Then, having consigned the box itself to the secure keeping of the ebony cabinet, she rang the bell for Jessica.

The summons was not answered with the abigail's wonted promptitude, and after allowing three or four minutes' license, Venetia rang again. This time the summons was speedily responded to; and Jessica came hurrying into the boudoir, with an apology and an explanation upon her lips for the previous neglect and delay.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon most sincerely," she said; "but I was busily engaged at the moment your ladyship's bell rang the first time, in seeing that the spare bedroom was put into order — "

"The spare bedroom!" ejaculated Venetia, affecting surprise.

"Yes, my lady," returned Jessica; "it appears that one of the guests in the saloon has taken the least drop too much."

"Ah! indeed," said Venetia. "And who is it that has thus forgotten himself? "

"I don't know which of the guests it is, my lady," replied Jessica; "indeed, I didn't hear his name mentioned at all. My lord," she continued, alluding to Horace, "came out and gave the hurried order that the spare bedroom was to be got ready immediately, and that was the reason I did not fly to answer your ladyship's bell when it rang the first time."

"I am not angry, Jessica," said Venetia, smiling. "And

while I think of it, I may as well observe that as I do not feel very well to-night, I shall perhaps take breakfast in bed in the morning. At all events, you need not come to me until I ring."

"Very good, my lady," observed Jessica, as she combed out Venetia's magnificent auburn hair, which was glossy and smooth as velvet, and shining as dark gold, — so luxuriant that it could be spread like a veil all over her shoulders and her bosom, and so long that it reached far below her waist.

"And you will tell the footman in the morning," continued Venetia, "in case I should forget to mention it again, that any one who calls at eleven o'clock in the forenoon punctually is to be shown straight up hither, as I expect some one on business of importance."

"Your ladyship's commands shall be attended to," said Jessica.

The night toilet progressed; the masses of silken, auburn hair were gathered loosely up with a sort of graceful negligence beneath an elegant lace cap, and having laid aside her apparel, Venetia dismissed her attendant for the night. Putting on a muslin wrapper, beautifully worked, and edged with the costliest lace, she threw herself upon the sofa; and as she lay half-reclining there, the dark purple velvet of that sofa formed a background to throw forth her superb form in all its grandest and most voluptuous effects.

The gorgeous contours of the bust, left half-exposed in their dazzling whiteness by the loose wrapper, the fine moulding of the form and the admirable proportions of the limbs, displayed by the folds of the very muslin which enveloped them, constituted a picture so exquisitely beautiful and yet so sensuously luxurious that a saint must have worshipped Venetia as the idol of devotion, and must have sunk into her arms even though it were tasting the forbidden fruit that would entail the loss of Paradise.

But what were Venetia's thoughts as she thus lay half-reclining upon that sofa, in all the voluptuous abandonment of a rich glowing form draped only with the night-gear and the loose muslin wrapper, and in an atmosphere that was warm and perfumed? For the fire of red-hot coals was heaped high up in the grate; and three or four porcelain vases exhaled a delicious fragrance. If anything were calculated to encourage sensations of softly longing wantonness, the

very attitude, the dress, the warmth, the perfume, the luxurious aspect of the boudoir, the silence of the hour, the mellow light shed by a lamp placed upon the table, — all these circumstances and influences were of themselves sufficient to produce that effect upon a woman of glowing temperament and who had abjured all notions of prudery. But when to these provocative and exciting causes was superadded the fact that she had given an appointment to an admirer, and that she was now every moment expecting this admirer's presence, it may well be supposed that Venetia's heart was already fluttering with desire, and that her cheeks were flushing, her eyes looking languid, and her bosom palpitating in the expectation of that deeper delirium and more frenetic whirl of pleasure into which the enjoyments of love would shortly plunge her.

But such would not have been her sensations were she expecting the prince regent instead of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. And here let us observe that his Royal Highness had in reality given her no intimation, ere now in the saloon, that he purposed to inflict his presence upon her this night; she had merely made the statement to her husband in order to ensure the uninterrupted privacy of her boudoir for herself and the baronet. But now the reader will possibly ask whether Venetia experienced any genuine or sincere affection for Sir Douglas Huntingdon. No, not at all. It was but a passing whim and a fantasy of the moment that had in the first instance led her to give him the slightest encouragement on that night when they met in the anteroom and became companion spectators of the scene that was passing the other side of the glass door on that occasion. Since then she had gone on encouraging him in the frequency of his visits, she had allowed him to become more and more familiar with her, she had also permitted him to bestow those little caresses upon her which she received without chiding, — all this she had done, we say, simply because, the barrier of virtue once broken down, she neither had the courage, the inclination, nor the self-respect sufficient to check the development of that natural wantonness which was hurrying her on into actual profligacy. Nor was it indeed likely that a young and lovely woman of fervid temperament, who had abandoned herself to the prince, whom she loathed, in order that she might further her

ambitious projects, would now hesitate to gratify a longing, however transient it might be, in which a really handsome and agreeable man like Sir Douglas Huntingdon was concerned. Moreover, Venetia required his services in a very important and delicate matter, and she therefore was willing to bestow upon him the tenderest and most precious mark of favour which a woman can possibly concede.

The reader has already seen that Venetia married Horace Sackville rather as a matter of convenience than through any other cause; and therefore the impression which his handsome person, his fascinating manners, his fine intellect, and his ardent but short-lived devotion had made upon her during the first two or three weeks of their engagement and marriage was rather an influence acting upon the senses than on the sentiment. It was the first stirring up and development of those naturally strong animal passions which she possessed; and therefore, as no deeper or more tender or enduring tie bound her to her husband, it cannot be astonishing that she should so soon have turned her wanton regards elsewhere. Moreover, even if she had really and truly loved Horace at all, this affection must naturally have received a ruinous shock by the fact that within three weeks after her marriage, he, the husband of this woman of transcendent beauty, had permitted her to resign herself coldly, systematically, and deliberately into the arms of the prince. True, all this was arranged, foreknown, and agreed upon, even before their marriage; true, it was a joint-stock patchwork of ambitions, with deeper ramifications, however, than the reader has yet learned, that had to be based upon this marriage; true also, that after Venetia's fall there were occasional intervals of compunction, remorse, weepings, and consolings, between the guilty wife and her pander-husband; true, likewise, that their first plungings into depravity and selfishness were characterized by occasional bursts of maudlin sentiment as well perhaps as of that genuine feeling, which was not altogether crushed beneath the weight of conscious infamy. Yes, true enough were all these circumstances and phases in the history of Horace and Venetia; but still, in their sober and serious moments, the wife could now only look upon the husband as the willing accomplice of her shame, and the husband could only regard the wife as a polluted profligate.

If we have paused to place all these explanatory details upon record, it has only been for the purpose of showing that Venetia was not likely to experience remorse or compunction while awaiting the presence of the admirer whom she was now expecting. On the contrary, as she lay pillowed upon the flocculent cushions of the sofa, cradled in the soft sensuousness of her own thoughts, receiving upon her slightly clad person the warmth of that bright red fire, in an atmosphere flooded with the serenely mellowed light and filled with a delicious fragrance, she seemed resolved, as it were, to abandon herself wholly to the pleasure of the present moment in order that she might the more deeply luxuriate in the enjoyments that were soon to come. Thus were her passions gradually exciting themselves and her desires being worked up to the highest degree, not only by the scope which she allowed her imagination to take and the bliss in which she permitted her fancy to run riot, but also by the surrounding influences of the scene.

At length, when she was becoming absolutely impatient of delay and wondering wherefore Sir Douglas Huntingdon came not, a gentle tap at the door reached her ear and thrilled like a galvanic flood of ecstasy through her entire frame. She rose, she unlocked the door, and then she flew back to the sofa, a sudden but momentary feeling of shame seizing her at the idea of appearing in that seminude condition in the presence of one in whose embraces she was as yet a stranger.

She heard him enter, close the door, then lock it again with strictest caution; and a moment afterward he was by her side, snatching her in his arms and covering her with caresses. But heavens! what words can depict the surprise, the amazement, nay, even the consternation which seized upon her when, instead of being strained to the breast of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, she found herself in the arms of the Earl of Curzon!

But at the same instant, yes, at the very same moment that she made this discovery, did the truth flash to her comprehension. She must have given the wrong letter to the earl! There could be no doubt about it; it was the only way to account for the present occurrence, and, moreover, it was an accident that, after all, might so easily have hap-

pened, seeing that neither note was addressed to any particular individual.

Thanks to that consternation which thus seized upon Venetia at the moment she found herself clasped in the arms of the Earl of Curzon, she gave vent to no cry, no ejaculation; and her presence of mind instantaneously returning, her resolve was taken almost as soon as the discovery of the misadventure itself was made. This resolve was to resign herself to circumstances. Refusal would be impossible as well as ridiculous in respect to a man who not only had her at this instant in his power, but who doubtless could also produce the letter in pursuance of which he had come thither. Besides which, the ardent kisses that Curzon lavished upon her speedily renewed those sensuous feelings which she had herself been irritating by her imagination and fostering by her fancy; and thus was it that in a very few moments the earl became the object of all those desires with which the image of the baronet had inspired her.

It was between eight and nine o'clock in the morning that the Earl of Curzon stole forth from Venetia's boudoir and crept back to the chamber which had been allotted to himself. To say that he was happy were to say nothing; his countenance was radiant with triumph. Pecuniary embarrassments, troubles for the present, anxieties for the future, and the dark suspicion that still rankled in his mind relative to his own wife, — all, all, were forgotten, all utterly lost sight of, all absorbed, as it were, in the one grand ecstatic reflection that Venetia, the incomparable Venetia, had abandoned herself to his arms.

But how strange, how passing strange was this consummation, this sort of realization of the pledge which he had made two months back when he stood in her presence at Acacia Cottage! He had then said, " I have sworn to possess you, and I will keep my vow. Be you guarded by all the angels of heaven, I will invoke all the devils of hell to succour me in carrying out my resolve." But without violence, without craft, without the succour of any of those infernal powers which he had threatened to enlist in his service, he had obtained the object of his wishes. It was scarcely a triumph; no, it was not a triumph, because there was no preliminary resistance offered. He had been invited to take

possession of the citadel at a moment when he had not been dreaming of making warfare against it; and it had surrendered not merely at discretion, but willingly, cheerfully, joyfully.

Such were the earl's thoughts on regaining the chamber which had been assigned to him. But perhaps his vanity would have been somewhat shocked, although his sensuous satisfaction might not have been less, had some little bird whispered in his ear the secret that it was purely and simply through a mistake he had been blessed with Venetia's love that night.

Immediately after the Earl of Curzon had stolen forth from the boudoir, Lady Sackville rose from the couch of illicit pleasure and rang the bell. Jessica speedily made her appearance; and the business of the toilet then commenced. Still bent upon retaining that empire which she had already gained over the mind of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, Venetia took considerable pains with herself in order to set off her charms to the greatest advantage. She ordered Jessica to allow her hair to fall in long flowing masses over her shoulders and down her back; and she chose a dress which, fitting close to her shape, developed its noble contours in their luxuriant fulness and their rounded plumpness. Nor did Jessica, who loved her mistress and was proud of her, — more than ever proud of her, indeed, since she had become a peeress and also the favourite of the prince regent, — Jessica, we say, did not fail to lavish her usual praises, encomia, and compliments upon Venetia's charms.

"Assuredly your ladyship has the finest hair I ever saw," observed the abigail. "Here it is a shining mass of gold where the light falls upon it, there it is of a glossy velvet darkness where the shade remains. If your ladyship were a queen, this glorious hair would render a crown needless. And your ladyship's neck, it is of dazzling whiteness, arching so gracefully, too. Permit me to arrange the body of your ladyship's dress. There, now it exhibits the fine slope of the shoulders; how ravishing a picture to the eyes of a male admirer! Pardon me, my lady, for venturing the observation, but your bust is the grandest, the finest, the most superb that ever woman possessed. There is but one lady I ever saw who can at all compare with your ladyship in this respect."

"And who is that?" asked Venetia, with a smile of ill-subdued satisfaction at her abigail's compliments.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," responded Jessica. "But though her bust is certainly very fine, it is not equal to your ladyship's. And now, if your ladyship would permit me to suggest that a fan has become an elegant appendage to even a morning costume — "

"To be sure! — a fashion just imported from France," observed Venetia, as she negligently took the fan which Jessica presented to her.

But we will not linger upon this portion of our narrative. Suffice it to say that it was eleven o'clock by the time Lady Sackville had finished her toilet and partaken of breakfast; and punctually as her watch indicated that hour was Sir Douglas Huntingdon ushered up into the boudoir.

Now be it understood that Venetia was guilty of no indiscretion, according to the notions then prevalent in the fashionable world, in thus receiving a male visitor in her private apartment. It was then a common custom, borrowed from the French; and therefore Lady Sackville did not compromise herself before her servants by thus granting an audience to the baronet in that boudoir.

Receiving him with the most winning and enchanting affability, she seated herself near the toilet-table and pointed to a chair close by, which he immediately took.

"I am punctual to the appointment with which you have honoured — may I not rather say favoured me," he observed, gazing tenderly upon her; and this remark was a further proof, if any additional one were wanting, that she had made a mistake in delivering the notes on the preceding evening.

"My dear Douglas," she said, for the first time addressing him thus familiarly by his Christian name, "there is nothing you can ask of me which I will not grant, provided you consent to do me that great and essential service to which I alluded last night."

"Have I not declared that you may command me even unto the very death?" exclaimed the baronet, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips.

"Yes, yes; and I believe you," she murmured. Then suddenly assuming a serious look, and speaking in a solemn tone, she said, "My dear Douglas, I am about to confide to you a secret which will prove how thoroughly I trust in your

honour, how completely I throw myself upon your goodness, and how implicitly I confide in your discretion. But the world says you are giddy, dissipated, reckless — "

"By Heaven! Venetia," exclaimed the baronet, whose countenance had been rapidly lighting up with the most enthusiastic joy while the lady was speaking, "think you that I am capable of allowing any act of madness or deed of folly on my part to entail injury upon you? No, by the living God! I could forswear wine, pleasure, recreation, ay, even the most innocent amusement, if I read disapproval in a word or look of thine. Besides, a man must be the basest of the base and the vilest of the vile who would not do anything, — even to the making of the largest sacrifices, —in order to merit the confidence of such a being as thou art."

"Thank you, oh, thank you, Douglas, for these assurances," said Venetia, in that delicious voice which sank low, deep, and melodious into the very depths of the soul. "And now learn that where I give my confidence I also bestow my love; and this love, then, as well as that confidence I accord unto thee."

"Oh, it is for me — it is for me to express my thanks, my illimitable gratitude, dearest, dearest Venetia!" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, again seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips; then as she bent toward him, her very look and attitude encouraged him to venture further still, and snatching her in his arms, he covered her lips, her cheeks, and her forehead with kisses.

Gently disengaging herself from his embrace after lingering in it a few moments, — sufficiently long, indeed, to convince him that she resented not this liberty which he had taken, and that he might hope in due time for the crowning favours of her love, — Venetia said, "I will now impart to thee that great secret which I have promised to reveal." Then, after a brief pause, during which she reflected profoundly, she said, "Go and unlock the ebon cabinet behind that screen, and bring me forth the jewel-case which you will find therein."

Thus speaking, she placed a key in the baronet's hand, and he at once proceeded to execute her instructions. The lock being low down in the door of the cabinet, he had to stoop even to his knees in order to introduce the key, the screen rendering that nook of the boudoir comparatively

dark. But at the very moment that he was thus kneeling down behind the screen, the door of the boudoir was gently opened and the Earl of Curzon made his appearance.

He had performed all the details of his toilet save with respect to putting on his coat, instead of which he wore an elegant dressing-gown that had been placed in his chamber for his use. Now, had he entered the boudoir properly dressed, there would not have been any impropriety or cause of suspicion in his visit; but the fact of thus introducing himself in a dressing-gown was naturally indicative of a more than ordinary familiarity existing between himself and Venetia.

Such was the thought that instantaneously flashed to her mind as he made his appearance; and she at once, with admirable self-possession, threw her arm over the screen with what to Curzon seemed a mere negligent and unpremeditated gesture, but with a wave of her hand which to Huntingdon behind that screen was a significant intimation that he must remain concealed there. Keeping therefore in his kneeling attitude, so as to continue unseen, the baronet gently and noiselessly kissed the tips of the fingers that thus hung over that barrier which concealed him; and this little tender proceeding on his part was meant to convey to Venetia not only an assurance that her hint was understood, but that it should also be obeyed.

At the same moment — for indeed all these little details in the embarrassing episode were the work of only an instant — the Earl of Curzon hastened to throw himself at the feet of Venetia, to whom he was about to pour forth his gratitude for the hours of love he had passed in her arms; but she suddenly checked the flood of language ere even a syllable had time to escape his lips, for, tapping him good-naturedly with her fan, and bending upon him an arch look, she said, "I know you have come to bid me 'good morning,' before you take your departure homeward; and you are now kneeling at my feet in mock humility — "

"On my honour!" ejaculated the earl, somewhat surprised at a tone and manner which were rather roguishly jocular than tender and loving, as he had expected.

"Not a word, my lord!" she again interrupted him; and with a rapid gesture she pointed toward the door, accompanying the movement with a look suddenly and

earnestly significant, as if to warn him that danger was nigh and that he was compromising her. "Yes, I know," she continued, still in that jocular tone which she had previously assumed, "that you are kneeling here to beg pardon for having partaken too generously of my husband's punch. But as I am every moment expecting a visit — from his Royal Highness — "

The earl started to his feet; and without uttering a word, he pressed Venetia's hand tenderly, darted upon her a look of mingled tenderness and deep meaning, and then hurried from the room.

An immense weight was now suddenly lifted from Venetia's mind, and she breathed freely once more. Her object was gained, her purpose was won; she had not only prevented the earl from addressing her in a manner which would betray their amour, but she had likewise kept Huntingdon behind the screen so that he did not observe that Curzon had on the dressing-gown.

"Now you can come forth again, my dear Douglas," she said, starting from her seat and looking gaily and roguishly at him over the screen as he rose to his feet. "To tell you the truth," she continued, "as you were behind the screen at the moment the door opened, I thought it best for you to remain there; hence the sudden sign which I made you to keep concealed, for had you come forth as the earl entered the room, he might have fancied that it was a lover startled from his hiding-place."

"And am I not a lover?" asked Sir Douglas Huntingdon, tenderly, as he embraced Venetia over the screen, for she gave him those explanations with an air of such artless candour that he did not for an instant suspect her sincerity; and, indeed, as he had not observed that the earl was clad in a dressing-gown, he of course saw nothing more in his visit than the interpretation which Venetia had so artfully put upon it at the time, namely, that he had come to bid her "good morning" and apologize with good-humoured gallantry for having committed such a solecism in good manners as to drink too much punch.

"Yes, you are indeed my lover, and a beloved one also," said Venetia, in reply to the baronet's question. "And now come forth from behind that screen, and bring me the jewel-case."

The baronet did as he was desired; and Venetia, opening the jewel-box, drew forth the packet of letters tied around with the white ribbon, and over which we have seen her weeping so bitterly. Unfastening the ribbon, she selected two or three of the letters, and requested Sir Douglas Huntingdon to glance his eye over their contents. He did so; a quarter of an hour or perhaps twenty minutes were thus absorbed, and while he was perusing those letters, Venetia sat pensive and mournful, watching his countenance.

"Now that you have read those letters," she said, when Sir Douglas laid down the last one which she had given him to peruse, "you have acquired some insight into the character of a being in whose behalf I am about to enlist your services."

Having thus spoken, Venetia took the letters and locked them up in her jewel-box again; then, after a long pause, during which all her thoughts appeared to be held in deep abstraction, she began to address Sir Douglas Huntingdon in a low and solemn tone of confidence.

But what she then said to him, the revelations which she made and the service which she exacted, must remain at present a mystery to our readers; and therefore do we at once drop the curtain upon the scene.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LAMB AMONGST THE WOLVES IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

Turn we now to one of the many handsome apartments of Leveson House, and there we shall find the beautiful Louisa Stanley seated in company with Lady Ernestina Dysart.

Her ladyship was clad in the weeds of widowhood, the sable garb becoming her admirably, and setting off the whiteness of her polished skin with dazzling effect. She even wore the widow's cap with a certain air of coquettishness, not suffering it to conceal altogether her light brown hair, which now, instead of showering in tresses over her shoulders, was arranged in simple bands.

In sweet and innocent contrast with Ernestina sat the charming and beautiful Louisa Stanley. When describing her in an earlier chapter, we said that her cheeks were not exactly of a rose colour, but of an animated white, so that without being absolutely pale, they were of the delicate bloom which deepens only through emotion or exercise into the vermeil of the peach. Such was Louisa's complexion then, at the time of her first introduction to the reader; but now, alas! now it was really and truly pale, the hand of grief having even effaced the health-tint of her youthful bloom. Indeed, it was only necessary to look for a moment into the depths of her blue eyes to perceive that the remorseless iron of care had penetrated deep, deep into her soul; but in the pensiveness of her mien and the fixity of her desponding gaze it was also easy to observe that a true Christian fortitude so far attempered and restrained her grief as to prevent it from bursting forth into frenzy or settling down into a blank despair.

It was about midday when we find Lady Ernestina Dysart

and Louisa Stanley thus seated together in one of the elegantly furnished drawing-rooms of Leveson House. The damsel had arrived there, in company with the marquis, on the preceding evening; and she instantaneously became the object of so much kind attention and sisterly regard on the part of Ernestina, that she had already conceived a profound affection for her ladyship. To one of her artless simplicity and unsuspecting character such a sudden fancy was natural enough; and as she had previously heard from Lord Leveson how his niece Ernestina had very lately lost in so shocking a manner a husband to whom she was devotedly attached, Louisa's sympathy was already excited toward the afflicted lady before they even met. Indeed, the touching and pathetic tale which the marquis had told Louisa upon that subject was so artfully conceived as to appeal to all the tenderest feelings of the maiden, and thus predisposed her naturally affectionate disposition to entertain a deep liking for Lady Ernestina.

Thus was it that though Louisa Stanley had only been a few hours beneath the same roof with Lord Leveson's niece, the latter had already obtained a strong hold upon the unsuspecting girl and had insinuated herself entirely into her confidence. Therefore, as they now sat together, Ernestina was bending the kindest looks upon Louisa and conversing with her in the softest and tenderest tones, while the maiden felt as if the music of that voice, so full of angelic commiseration and soothing gentleness, flowed like an anodyne into the recesses of her wounded heart.

"My dear young friend," said Lady Ernestina, "you are doubtless most anxious for the return of my uncle."

"Ah! dear lady," cried Louisa, "can you not understand that I long to fold a beloved sister in my arms, — a sister from whom I have been separated for so many months?"

"But I fear that there must be some mistake relative to your sister's address," observed the patrician lady. "However, we shall see in a few minutes; my uncle has been gone nearly an hour, and we may therefore expect his return every moment. Indeed, I wonder what keeps him so long."

"Is Stratton Street far from hence?" inquired Louisa.

"Far!" ejaculated Lady Ernestina. "Oh, no, it is not five minutes' walk; but I had forgotten that this is the first time you ever visited London. When you were giving me

that rapid outline of your history this morning, you mentioned the name of Beckford, and observed that your sister was staying with a lady and gentleman of that name."

"Yes; it is not long that they have removed into Stratton Street," returned Louisa; "they used to live at number 20, Hanover Square."

"Number 20, Hanover Square!" ejaculated Ernestina, stricken with surprise, and even startled by the mention of an address which instantly conjured up fearful and mysterious associations in her mind. "That is the abode of the Malverns!"

"But have you not in London many streets bearing the same name?" inquired Louisa.

"Yes, to be sure; and there may be several Stratton Streets, but certainly only one at the West End of the town. There may also be another Hanover Square, for anything that I know; but there is assuredly only one of that name in the region of fashion. However, there is no doubt but the marquis will find out your sister, whatever Stratton Street she may be residing in."

Louisa's lovely countenance brightened up at these words, and with a look did she thank Lady Ernestina for the assurance. A brief pause then ensued in the conversation; for Louisa began to wonder within herself whether Clara would chide her for having so long abandoned their afflicted aunt to the care of a comparative stranger, and for hurrying in the first place to Paris relative to her lover, and now coming up to London expressly to behold and embrace a sister.

On the other hand, Lady Ernestina was just thinking how she should enter upon a certain task which her delectable uncle had set her. For every barrier of delicate feeling and pure sentiment was so far broken down between the uncle and niece that they no longer sought to practise toward each other any concealment of disposition or principles. On the one hand, the marquis knew that his niece had been a very profligate and abandoned demirep, first with a lover of her own choice, then with the prince into whose arms she was forced; he had seen her so far forget herself as to visit a house of ill-fame in the expectation of meeting a wealthy admirer; he knew likewise that she had actually been the means of consigning her husband to the scaffold, whereas she might have saved him had she chosen.

On the other hand, Lady Ernestina had experienced positive proof that her uncle employed a procuress, the infamous Mrs. Gale, to entice young females to her house in order to appease his brutal lusts. Moreover, during his absence in Paris, and since the adventure with the Hangman in the treacherous chair, she had penetrated into the gallery of paintings and sculptures, and had thus obtained a deeper, ay, the deepest, insight into the hideous sensuality of her uncle's character. Consquently, knowing all these things of each other, and mutually aware, too, that all these things were thus known, it would have been the most absurd of mockeries to maintain any longer the semblance of delicate feeling, propriety, or virtue; and therefore it seemed as if the marquis, the moment he returned from Paris, was fully prepared to throw off the mask altogether. Such indeed was his intention; and such was the interpretation that Ernestina put upon his conduct when he whispered the following words in her ear after Louisa had been conducted to her chamber: "I need not tell you wherefore I have brought this girl hither. She is innocent as a lamb, and artless as a child; it is for you to initiate her in the mysteries of life, so that when I choose to address her in the language of passion, she may not colour with shame, but with desire."

Thus had the marquis spoken to his niece on the preceding evening, after having consigned Louisa to her care, and just before he went to pay that visit to the prince at Carlton House which has been mentioned in a preceding chapter. It was a hideous thing for an uncle thus to address a niece, a still more hideous thing that a niece should consent to obey such instructions on the part of an uncle. And it may seem the more dreadful, too, inasmuch as not many weeks had elapsed since that uncle and that niece were sitting, shamefaced and weeping, in the presence of each other, at the mutual discoveries of frailty and demoralization which were then made. But the instant the mask thus fell from their countenances the barrier of delicacy was speedily annihilated between them; and, moreover, be it observed that in the aristocratic mind the rank weeds of vice and crime spring up, when once they have germinated, with an astonishing rapidity, and speedily bloom in all their poisoned luxuriance in the heated atmosphere of fashionable life.

The brief pause which followed the observations relative to Stratton Street, Hanover Square, and Louisa's sister was interrupted by Lady Ernestina Dysart observing, "My dear girl, I cannot suffer you to look thus dull and miserable."

"Ah! dear lady," said Louisa, with a profound sigh, "I have so much to render me unhappy."

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," returned Lady Ernestina, "but the loss of a young man who appears to be utterly unworthy of the love you bestowed upon him."

"Oh, treat not the circumstance so lightly," exclaimed Louisa, both shocked and amazed at the remark; for all Ernestina's previous allusions to the subject had been expressive of a tender condolence and delicate sympathy.

"Dearest Louisa," cried the artful patrician, "not for a moment did I mean to vex or startle you; but I was merely about to introduce a truth which you yourself will recognize sooner or later, namely, that the self-styled Jocelyn Loftus is not the only handsome, intelligent, and fascinating young gentleman in the world."

"Oh, Lady Ernestina, if a stranger had made that observation to me," exclaimed Louisa, now more painfully surprised and deeply shocked than at first, "I should have regarded it either as an insult or else as a sign of unfeeling thoughtlessness."

"I am addressing you, my dear young friend," said Ernestina, "as a woman of the world should address a young and inexperienced girl."

"Ah! lady," said Louisa, with a look of angelic frankness, "never, never shall I obey the dictates of any influence save the natural impulses of my own heart. I have loved Jocelyn tenderly and well; and, oh, despite his deep, deep criminality, I love him, yes, love him as tenderly and devotedly still. But there is within me, lady, a feeling superior even to that fond and now hopeless love of mine; and this feeling is a sense of duty which tells me that henceforth Jocelyn must ever remain a stranger to me in the world, no matter how fondly his image may be cherished in my heart."

"This is the way young maidens always talk when disappointed in their first love," said Ernestina, watching Louisa's countenance attentively to see how she took the remark, and whether it would be prudent to venture any further at present. Then, perceiving that the damsel be-

came thoughtful, as if weighing the matter seriously in her mind, Ernestina continued to observe, "If you were to remain long with us in London you would soon perceive that what you call love performs but a very secondary part in genteel marriages. I will give you an example. It is not two months since the beauty of the fashionable world, Venetia Trelawney, married a very handsome, intelligent, and fascinating young gentleman named Horace Sackville. Their honeymoon was short indeed, and at its expiration they were suddenly created Lord and Lady Sackville. But that was not all. His lordship was at the same time nominated to a high official situation in the household of the prince regent; and, accordingly, the newly married couple gave up their beautiful villa at Knightsbridge and took possession of a suite of apartments in Carlton House. Now Carlton House, my dear Louisa, is the prince regent's palace; and perhaps you may have heard that the prince regent himself is a very naughty, wicked man, and much too fond of the ladies. But, in plain terms, the reason why Lord and Lady Sackville thus took up their abode at Carlton House was in order that her ladyship might be under the same roof with the prince, whose favourite she has become. Thus, you see, although it is most probable that Lord and Lady Sackville married in the first instance for what is called love, they hesitated not to make the sacrifice of that feeling when titles, pensions, and places were offered them. As a matter of course, then, this Venetia of whom I am speaking to you is the mistress of the prince — "

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed Louisa, the colour mounting to her cheeks as her pure soul revolted from the narrative the main point of which had only just that instant flashed to her comprehension. "Oh, if such detestable creatures as this Venetia constitute the charm, the glory, and the worship of your fashionable world of London, how little do I envy the rich and the great ones of this metropolis! Better, better far is my own humble cottage situated in a retired suburb of Canterbury, and more welcome to me would prove a chaplet of the roses that bloom in summer over that cottage portico than the most brilliant coronet glittering upon the brow of your titled lady of the metropolis."

Ernestina was about to respond to these observations,

wehn the door opened and the Marquis of Leveson entered the room.

"What tidings, my lord?" exclaimed Louisa, springing from her seat and bounding toward him with the most eager curiosity.

"Patience, patience, young lady," answered the nobleman, assuming a playful manner. "Your sister Clara does indeed reside at the address you mentioned in Stratton Street, and also with those worthy people, Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, whom you named."

As the marquis thus spoke, Lady Ernestina contemplated him with the profoundest astonishment, which was not, however, observed by Louisa, who was gazing intently upon the nobleman, but with her suspense now relieved by a gradually expanding gleam of pleasure.

"Yes," continued the marquis, in a tone which seemed candid and frank enough to Louisa, but which nevertheless now satisfied Ernestina that he was practising some artifice upon the maiden, "yes, my dear girl," he continued, "I am delighted to have ascertained for your sake that there really is no error in your sister's address; but I am sorry to inform you that she is out of town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford for a few days, possibly a week."

"Oh, how unfortunate I am!" ejaculated Louisa, a sudden cloud lowering upon her lovely countenance, and the tears starting forth upon her long lashes. "But are they gone far from London? Can I not hasten after them? Oh, I feel convinced that my sister will be so rejoiced to see me."

"Unfortunately," said the marquis, "the servants in Stratton Street are not aware whither their master and mistress, together with Miss Stanley, are gone. It is, however, certain that they will all return home again in a week or ten days."

"Oh, did I not say that I was unfortunate?" exclaimed Louisa, clasping her hands together and now bursting forth into a flood of tears. "I dare not, must not, remain away from Canterbury; I have already deserted my poor afflicted aunt too long. The thought of thus abandoning her fills me with remorse; and therefore I must hasten back home, and postpone the hope of an interview with my sister until some more auspicious occasion."

"You have already admitted, my dear young lady,"

said the Marquis of Leveson, "that I have given you the best possible advice ever since you placed yourself under my paternal guardianship. Now, I beg of you to do nothing precipitately. You know that your aunt is kindly treated by the young lady whom you have left to take care of her; and therefore you would do well to remain here in London until the return of your sister, who, depend upon it, would never forgive you if you did not follow my advice in this respect. My house shall be your home; and you know that in me you possess a sincere well-wisher, although our acquaintance has been so short, and although you had likewise heard statements from the lips of Miss Mary Owen prejudicial to my true character."

Artless, unsuspicious, and confiding though the young damsel naturally was, yet there was something in this speech which displeased her. She knew not what it was that thus seemed to grate upon some mysterious chord in her heart, nor could she have pointed out which particular sentence or phrase it was that excited a feeling of uneasiness within her. But certain it was that alarming suspicions suddenly took possession of her mind; and the moment the marquis endeavoured to impress upon her the conviction of his sincerity, some secret voice appeared to whisper from the depths of her soul that he was deceiving her. The how or the wherefore did not strike her, nor did she pause to conjecture; for now that the train of her suspicions was once fired, it blazed up with astonishing speed. Back, back to her remembrance came vividly and forcibly a thousand little things which Mary Owen had let drop relative to the Marquis of Leveson; she bethought herself also of a certain peculiar expression which she had frequently noticed in the regards that he fixed upon her when they were in Paris or travelling together, and to her memory returned the singular discourse in which Lady Ernestina Dysart had indulged just previously to her uncle's entrance.

"My lord," she said, endeavouring to veil her fears and therefore her suspicions as well as she was able, "I thank your lordship for all the kindnesses I have experienced at your hand; I thank her ladyship also for the generous sympathy I have received from her during the few hours I have been beneath this roof. But you must not deem me ungrateful for so much hospitality, if I declare at once that I am

determined to leave London without delay for Canterbury."

"Louisa, my dear girl," exclaimed the marquis, evidently astounded and almost dismayed by this resolve so decisively expressed, and, at the same time, there was in his look something so sinister that, unsophisticated as Louisa was, she at once read therein the confirmation of her suspicions, " you cannot think, you must not entertain — no — really," stammered the nobleman, " I will not permit — "

" My lord, I am determined to hasten home without delay," interrupted Louisa, her courage rising in proportion as her position seemed to become more menacing and dangerous. " It is not yet an hour past noon; perhaps your lordship will allow one of your domestics to order a post-chaise to be in immediate attendance for me? "

" The haste, the precipitation, with which you are thus about to depart, my dear young friend," said Lady Ernestina Dysart, rising from her seat and taking Louisa's hand, " would almost amount to an impeachment upon our hospitality, or indeed a mistrust of our friendship toward you."

" Pray do not deem me ungrateful, nor thus prejudge my motives," said Louisa, with a telltale blush upon her cheeks which showed that her thoughts were in reality precisely as Ernestina had interpreted them. " Accept all my thanks, and if you would add to the obligations which you have imposed upon me, then suffer me to depart at once."

And having thus spoken, Louisa hastened to the bell-pull and rang it somewhat violently.

At the same instant the marquis and his niece exchanged rapid glances, expressive of the conviction that it was useless to try further argument or persuasion; and then the significant look which the nobleman assumed made Ernestina aware that his lordship had determined upon strong and coercive measures.

A footman promptly answered Louisa's summons; and, in a tone of complete confidence, she said, " Will you be so kind as to order a post-chaise to be immediately procured? "

The domestic bowed a respectful assent; but as he raised his eyes again, at the moment of turning to quit the room, he saw Lord Leveson shake his head at him, unperceived, however, by Louisa, and the footman accordingly understood that he was not to order the post-chaise.

" With your permission," said Louisa to Lady Ernestina, the moment the servant had retired, " I will now ascend to my chamber and prepare for departure."

" I will join you there in a few moments, Louisa," was the reply, " to see whether I can be of service to you, since you are determined to quit us."

Louisa Stanley then left the room; and the moment the door closed behind her, the marquis addressed himself in hurried and excited terms to his niece.

" Ernestina," he said, " you explained to me this morning how, during my absence in France, a ruffian introduced himself into this house, and how he concealed himself in my secret suite of apartments. You likewise confessed to me how you and the prince proceeded thither, and how you found that burglarious villain held captive in one of my mechanical chairs. You further told me how this man turned out to be the public executioner, and how the prince, with a heavy bribe, ensured his services to buoy up Dysart till the very last moment with the hope of a reprieve."

" But wherefore, in the name of Heaven, recapitulate all these details? " exclaimed Ernestina, surveying her uncle with astonishment.

" Because," he responded, in a hoarse, thick voice, as if the profound concentration of a burning passion was impelling him into extremes at which he trembled and was afraid, and forcing him to hold a language to his own niece at which he was both ashamed and shocked, " because," he said, " since you have chosen to enter those rooms for your own pleasure, you may now revisit them for mine; and because, since you found seated in one of those chairs a man who afterward helped to rid you of a detested husband, you may now inveigle into that same chair this young girl on whom I have set my heart."

" But, good heavens! " cried Ernestina, " she is too pure, too innocent, and this outrage cannot be perpetrated with impunity."

" Do not reason with me," cried her uncle, impetuously. " You see that she is escaping from my toils, she is bent upon leaving us, she evidently suspects something, and it is only by clipping the angel-wings of her innocence that we can prevent this startled dove from flying away."

" Well, be it as you will," said Ernestina. " You doubtless

foresee all the consequences, and I will do as you command. But tell me — one word — what is all this mystery about her sister, these unknown Beckfords, and Stratton Street? "

" Oh, such a mystery, indeed, such a secret as I have learned this day! " exclaimed the marquis. " But I cannot explain myself now; on another occasion I will tell you all, everything, and then you will indeed be as much astonished as I was. But now hasten and do as I have bid you. Here is the key of the door opening from the Crimson Drawing-room."

Ernestina darted a look of intelligence upon her uncle as she took the key, — a look which told him as plainly as possible that all which depended on herself should be done to facilitate his designs. Then, quitting the apartment where this colloquy had taken place, she repaired first to the Crimson Drawing-room to unlock the door leading into the secret chambers, and then hurried up-stairs to Louisa's room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WOLVES THROWING OFF THEIR DISGUISE

In the meantime Louisa had sought the chamber where she had passed the preceding night, and she immediately began to pack up her trunk for departure. Not for an instant did she suspect that the Marquis of Leveson had dared negative her orders to fetch the post-chaise; but still she felt that she should breathe more freely when beyond the threshold of this grand, aristocratic mansion, the very atmosphere of which seemed heavy, oppressive, and ominous of the dead lull and stifling closeness which pervades the outburst of the storm.

Scarcely had she finished packing her trunk when Lady Ernestina Dysart entered she chamber.

"My dear Louisa," said the artful woman, assuming a look of such well-feigned sorrow that the maiden was completely thrown off her guard thereby, and began to fancy that she had wronged even the marquis himself by her suspicions, "my dear Louisa," repeated her ladyship, in the most soothing, endearing, and sympathetic tone, "I am truly vexed that you purpose to leave us thus suddenly; but my uncle desires me to say that he will watch for your sister's return home in company with her kind friends, Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, and he will let you know through me when you can come back to London with the certainty of meeting her."

"I am truly grateful," said our heroine, "for this proof of kind consideration on the part of his lordship and yourself." But still Louisa spoke with a certain degree of restraint, for she could not give facile utterance to words that came not wholly from her heart.

"Oh, do not thank me for anything which I may do for

you," exclaimed Eernestina; "it is a real pleasure to serve so sweet a girl as yourself. And now, my dear Louisa, as it will be a quarter of an hour at least before the post-chaise is ready, I have ordered refreshments to be served up in my own chamber; and thither must you accompany me, so that we may have a few minutes' *tête-à-tête* before you leave."

This proposal was made with so much friendly candour and winning affability that Louisa did not hesitate to accept it. Lady Ernestina accordingly led the way first into the Crimson Drawing-room, and thence into the adjoining apartment, the elegance of which naturally excited Louisa's admiration, notwithstanding the claims which other and far more serious matters had upon her thoughts. But her patrician guide did not allow her much leisure to contemplate this room, with its luxurious sofas ranged all around the walls, its splendid porcelain vases exhaling delicious perfumes, and its exquisitely chased silver lamp suspended to the ceiling. Opening the door at the farther extremity, Ernestina conducted the maiden into the next room, where, as the reader will remember, the carpet was the thickest ever trodden upon, and where the armchairs were the most massive ever seen, — provided, too, with cushions of corresponding proportions.

"This is the anteroom to my own chamber," said the false-speaking and evil-intentioned Ernestina, "and I ordered the refreshments to be served up here. I suppose the footman must have misunderstood me," she continued, assuming a tone of vexation. "Sit down, my dear girl," she added, affably pointing to a chair, "and I will ring the bell for luncheon."

Louisa unhesitatingly proceeded to place herself where the treacherous lady thus pointed; but scarcely had the young virgin's form made its imprint upon the flocculent cushion when the sudden click of the secret mechanism was heard, and she found herself strangely but alarmingly held captive by means of the springs that clasped her wrists and the steel bands that fastened their gripe upon her shoulders.

The terror of consternation for a few moments sealed her lips; but as she beheld Lady Ernestina suddenly disappear through a door which opened in the wall exactly facing the treacherous chair, the unfortunate girl saw indeed too well that she was betrayed, and a piercing scream burst

from her lips. But almost immediately after Ernestina had flitted away so abruptly, and while that rending scream was still vibrating through the suite of rooms, the Marquis of Leveson stood before his intended victim.

He had entered by that same door through which his niece had fled; and closing it behind him, he at once said, in a low but earnest tone, "Louisa, your cries are unavailing; no mortal ear do they reach beyond the four walls of this room, and therefore I need scarcely observe that you are in my power."

"My lord, my lord," faltered the maiden, in a dying tone, while her brain grew dizzy and a film came over her eyes, "take pity upon the friendless orphan who never injured you."

"Oh, Louisa!" exclaimed the marquis, fixing upon her those satyr eyes that were burning with desire, "to ask mercy for yourself is to tell me to make an impossible sacrifice. Listen to me, dear girl, do not despair, do not give way to grief, do not look thus wildly, thus vaguely upon me. You know that I bear one of the loftiest and proudest titles in England, that my riches are immense; you have seen enough of this mansion here to know that it is spacious and magnificent, and I may add that in the loveliest spots of England there are country-seats, perfect paradises in themselves, of which I am also the possessor. Of this lofty title, then, will I make thee the sharer, of this wealth will I make thee the mistress; my mansions, my domains, my rural vilas, all shall be thine, Louisa, if thou wilt give me thy love."

Our heroine heard the tones of the nobleman's voice, but comprehended not what he said. There was a hurry in her brain that made her thoughts a whirlwind and threw her senses into confusion. All she knew was that some tremendous danger menaced her, and that she was sinking beneath the weight of an ineffable consternation.

The marquis saw that she was thus overwhelmed, that her head was drooping, and that her senses were slowly abandoning her; and he thought within himself, "I will not excite nor arouse her, I will let her sink into insensibility, and then —"

The instant Lady Ernestina Dysart had performed her treacherous part toward poor Louisa Stanley, she disap-

peared from the presence of the outraged maiden in the manner already described. The reader will have comprehended that she touched the secret spring and opened the invisible door communicating with her uncle's room, where indeed his lordship had been awaiting the issue of the adventure.

Hastily telling him that the deed was done, Ernestina traversed the bedchamber and hurried into the Crimson Drawing-room, where she threw herself upon a sofa, palpitating with excitement. For bad, depraved, and unprincipled though she was, she nevertheless felt shocked and frightened in the presence of this tremendous iniquity to which she had lent herself.

Not many moments, however, did she thus give way to her painful reflections ere she was startled by the entrance of a footman, saying, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon requests an immediate interview with either my lord marquis or your ladyship."

Ernestina was about to desire the domestic to say that neither she nor her uncle was at home, when the baronet, who had followed close behind the footman, now walked unceremoniously into the room.

The lackey accordingly retired; and this singular behaviour on the part of Huntingdon so increased, or indeed so completely crowned Ernestina's agitation that, all woman of the world though she was, she felt covered with confusion.

"Pardon this intrusion, my lady," said Huntingdon, who spoke in the tone and with the air of a man bent upon the performance of some decisive part; "but I must see the marquis immediately."

"My uncle is particularly engaged," faltered Lady Ernestina, a deep blush suffusing her cheeks and running up even unto her forehead, so that it was lost beneath the massive bands of her light brown hair.

"If I cannot see the marquis, then," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, immediately, "your ladyship will perhaps have the kindness to afford me an interview with Miss Louisa Stanley, who is now staying at Leveson House."

Ernestina gave a visible start as this demand smote her ears; and with the instinctive impulse of a guilty conscience, she cast her eyes rapidly toward the door communicating with the private suite of apartments.

Sir Douglas, who was keenly alive to every look or gesture on the part of the lady, and who saw in her increasing confusion something calculated to excite the most alarming suspicions, failed not to observe that glance which she involuntarily flung toward the door. He was no stranger to the existence of that suite of apartments. As one of the most intimate friends of Lord Leveson, all the treacherous or licentious mysteries thereof were well known to him; and it was therefore natural that he should now suddenly argue the very worst. He had been told that Leveson was particularly engaged; his visit had evidently overwhelmed Lady Ernestina with confusion and dismay, and that telltale look which she had flung at the door of the private chambers at once seemed to afford a clue to all that was passing.

"Ah! I understand," exclaimed the baronet; "my friend the marquis is in those rooms, and as I am no stranger to the mysteries of his mansion, I will, with your ladyship's permission, at once seek him there."

As he thus spoke, Sir Douglas Huntingdon hastened toward the door of the private apartments; but Lady Ernestina sprang after him and caught him by the arm, exclaiming, "No, sir, you must not intrude upon my uncle's privacy."

"I am well aware, as a matter of course," said Huntingdon, "that my behaviour may seem somewhat extraordinary; but it will be your ladyship's fault if it now merge into downright rudeness.

"Rudeness! what do you mean, sir?" ejaculated Ernestina, a deeper crimson than before suffusing her face, and her eyes flashing angrily. "You surely, as a gentleman, are incapable of rudeness toward me, a lady?"

"Then, as a lady," cried the baronet, in a stern and even imperious tone such as perhaps he had never used in his life before, "conduct yourself like a lady, and depend upon it I should never dream of treating you otherwise."

"Again I demand of you, sir, what you mean by this insulting observation?" cried Ernestina, now labouring under a terrible excitement.

"I mean," responded the baronet, with a significance of look and a determination of manner that made her quail and recoil in dismay, "I mean that if you prevent me from entering those rooms, I shall suspect that you are acquainted

with all the mysteries which they contain; and this will not be highly creditable to you. Moreover, if I discover that anything outrageous or vile is now passing in those rooms, I shall be justified in setting you down as the accessory and the accomplice."

Ernestina fell crushed and annihilated upon a chair, burying her face in her hands; for it appeared to her as if her whole heart was suddenly laid bare in its boundless depravity to the view of that man who addressed her in a tone of such haughty confidence, stern remonstrance, and terrible menace.

The baronet, having thus silenced and subdued that lady whose complicity in her uncle's licentious proceedings was now too evident, lost no time in opening the door leading into the secret apartments, and which Ernestina had ere now left unlocked after conducting Louisa thither.

Meantime the Marquis of Leveson, perceiving that Louisa Stanley was rapidly losing her consciousness, and that she was indeed fainting in that chair which so treacherously held her captive, stood for a few moments gloating upon the charms of which he hoped so soon to become the master. Her head hung down upon her bosom, of which his lustful eyes caught a slight glimpse; and the bands, clasping her shoulders, held her back in such a manner that, though her charming head thus drooped like a flower on its tall slender stalk, yet her form was retained upright in the chair. Therefore his gaze could slowly wander over the graceful symmetry and virgin contours of that exquisite shape, — a shape that possessed all the light and airy elegance of the sylph, with just sufficient fulness to denote that the last stage of girlhood was bursting into the luxuriant bloom and ripeness of womanhood.

But just at the moment when the Marquis of Leveson fancied that our heroine was sinking into a profound insensibility, and while all his detestable passions were boiling up to a frenzied degree at what appeared to be the close consummation of his diabolical project, just at the instant, in fact, that he believed himself to be touching on his crowning infamy, Louisa appeared to be startled suddenly back to full consciousness.

Raising her head, she gazed for a moment, a single moment,

wildly around her; then, all the tremendous truth flashing to her recollection and all the incidents of her position recurring vividly to her comprehension, she gave vent to another loud, long, and piercing scream.

" Foolish girl! I have told thee that thy cries are vain," said the marquis, going straight up to her and looking her full in the face. " Will you be mine, I say, voluntarily? Will you yield of your own accord, and accept my hand, my fortune, my title — "

But scream upon scream thrilled from the maiden's lips; and the marquis, stamping his foot with rage, was bursting forth into violent threats, when suddenly the door between this and the first room of the suite was thrown violently open, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon sprang into the presence of the startled nobleman and his intended victim.

" Release this young lady immediately," exclaimed the baronet, laying his hand upon the collar of the marquis.

" What! you, Huntingdon, thus to interfere with the pursuits of an old friend? " faltered Leveson, not knowing what to think of the intrusion.

" Let us not bandy words," said the baronet, sternly; " you see that I am resolute. Come, I understand not precisely the mechanism of this chair, but I command you to release Miss Louisa Stanley forthwith."

The nobleman saw that Huntingdon was not only in earnest, but also fully bent upon the deliverance of the maiden; and accordingly, with a hand trembling as if suddenly palsied, the marquis touched the spring which instantaneously released our heroine from her captivity.

Falling at the feet of Sir Douglas Huntingdon in the enthusiasm of her joy at this sudden and providential liberation, Louisa took his hand and pressed it with all the fervour of her young heart's gratitude. The baronet hastened to raise her; and fixing his eyes upon the marquis, who stood by pale and trembling with rage, he said, " Nothing of all this shall be known if you permit Miss Louisa Stanley to depart from your house without any further attempt at molestation. But if a finger be raised to impede her passage, I will adopt any measure, no matter how much calculated to expose you — "

" Retire then — go — depart," faltered the marquis, with

a strong effort to subdue the violence of his passion; "but I beseech, I implore Miss Louisa Stanley not to betray me, and, above all things, not to breathe a word to the ruin of my niece."

Our heroine's heart was too full of joy at her happy deliverance to allow her tongue to utter a word; but Sir Douglas Huntingdon said, emphatically, "I promise you, Leveson, on my honour as a gentleman, that nothing of all this shall be revealed elsewhere."

Having thus spoken, the baronet hastily conducted Louisa Stanley into the Crimson Drawing-room, closing behind them the doors through which they passed. Lady Ernestina was no longer there; she had retired in shame, terror, and grief, to her own apartment, leaving the perplexing and menacing adventure to take its own course.

"Miss Stanley," the baronet now said, the moment they were together in the Crimson Drawing-room, "have the goodness to read this note."

The damsel instantaneously took the billet which was presented to her, and an ejaculation of joy fell from her lips as she recognized her sister's handwriting. Tearing open the note, she read the following words:

"13, Stratton Street,
"Nov. 16, 1814.

"The bearer of this, my ever dear Louisa, is a gentleman in whom you may confide. He will take you away from a place where you are surrounded by manifold dangers and will bring you at once to me.

"Your affectionate sister,
"Clara."

Words are incapable of describing the delight and happiness which now sprang up in Louisa's bosom, even to the absorption for the time being of her grief on account of her lover's presumed infidelity.

"Then my sister, my beloved sister, is indeed in town," she exclaimed, "and the marquis deceived me."

"No, Miss Stanley, he did not altogether deceive you," answered the baronet; "for if he had not called in Stratton Street ere now, your sister could not, of course, have known

that you were at Leveson House or even in London at all. But the truth is this: your sister was indeed absent from town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, but she came back suddenly and alone, in order to execute some little commission for Mrs. Beckford. She arrived in Stratton Street only a few minutes after the marquis had left. Knowing his evil reputation, she was shocked and horrified at the idea of her sister being beneath his roof; and as I happened to call at the moment, she besought me to come with this note which you have just read. My carriage is at the door, and so soon as you are ready, I shall have much pleasure in escorting you to Stratton Street."

Louisa hastened up-stairs for her bonnet and scarf, with which she speedily returned to the Crimson Drawing-room, well pleased at encountering neither the marquis nor Lady Ernestina upon the stairs. Having rung the bell, she ordered the footman who answered the summons to have her trunk taken down to the baronet's carriage, which was waiting at the door; and when, in a few minutes, the domestic announced that her commands had been executed, she accompanied Sir Douglas Huntingdon from Leveson House.

And now who can describe the feelings of this young, beautiful, and artless girl as she took her seat in the vehicle which was to convey her to that sister from whom she had been separated for five long months? Yet while rolling along in the handsome equipage, she did not forget to renew her thanks to Sir Douglas Huntingdon for the immense service which he had rendered her; but he assured the charming girl that he was only too happy in having arrived at Leveson House so seasonably as to rescue her from the peril in which the darkest and deepest treachery had placed her. Indeed, to tell the truth, as Sir Douglas Huntingdon contemplated with respectful admiration the lovely damsel by his side, he could not help thinking that there was even in the world a pleasure more genuine and more sweet than to triumph over innocence, — namely, to rescue it from impending ruin.

But neither the baronet nor Louisa had many minutes for reflection or conversation, inasmuch as the carriage soon dashed up to the door of a handsome house in Stratton Street; and looking forth from the window of the vehicle,

our heroine beheld the countenance of her sister at one of the casements of the drawing-room.

In another minute Louisa was clasped — firmly, fondly clasped — in the embrace of that affectionate sister; and not only their kisses but also their tears were mingled.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SISTERS

The drawing-room where the sisters thus met was very handsomely furnished, and bore all the evidences of a refined female taste. It was the same room where Jocelyn Loftus had seen Clara Stanley on the occasion of his visit to London, and where she had given her approval of his suit in respect to Louisa.

The sisters were now alone together; for Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not followed our heroine up into that room, but remained in an apartment below. When the first effusion of joy was over, and the first transports of delight at this meeting were somewhat subsided, Clara and Louisa sat down side by side upon the sofa, and began to contemplate each other with the deepest, tenderest interest.

On the one hand, Clara beheld her younger sister beautiful as ever, and with all that ineffable sweetness of look and innocence of mien which indicated the stainless purity of her soul. She saw her, too, at great advantage, for the pallor and the pensiveness previously occasioned by Jocelyn's supposed perfidy had now yielded to the roseate tinge of joy and the brightness of look which reflected the heart's holiest satisfaction. Clara therefore beheld her sister lovely and lovable as she was when they parted, — one of the chastest and most charming ornaments which the sex ever bestowed upon this world, an incarnation of all the sweetest, truest, and most ethereal attributes which piety or poesy ascribes unto angels.

On the other hand, Louisa beheld her sister more grandly beautiful, more superbly handsome than when they parted under the rose-covered portico of their Kentish cottage. She saw in Clara a magnificent woman the glory of whose charms

seemed to have expanded into a finer and more dazzling bloom in the hothouse of London fashion. Nor less did it strike Louisa that everything at all girlish which might have lingered in the manners or looks of Clara some months back had now totally departed. The finest gloss of courtly elegance seemed to rest upon her like a charm and hang about her like a spell; there was a grandeur in every movement, a brilliancy in every gesture, softened and subdued only by the polish of an exquisite refinement, and more so by the tenderness of feeling which she now experienced at this meeting with her sister. In a word, our fair young heroine, although she had ever been accustomed to look up to Clara as an elder sister, now regarded her with the deference that mingles in the affection which a daughter experiences for a mother. For Louisa still felt herself a mere girl; whereas Clara looked in every respect not only the brilliant woman, but also the great lady. Thus Louisa, with her nineteen years and a half, felt as if she were a miss of fifteen or sixteen in the presence of this elder sister, who, though only twenty-one and a half, possessed all the worldly demeanour as well as the luxuriance of charms which characterize the superb matron of at least five or six years older.

Such were the impressions respectively made by this meeting of the sisters; and when they had gazed long and with earnest fondness upon each other, Louisa suddenly exclaimed, " Oh, Clara, are you angry with me for having abandoned my home, for having gone to Paris, and now for having come up to London? "

" Do not talk of anger, dearest girl," said Clara, " while our hearts are yet throbbing with all the first transports of joy at this meeting. Angry with you, dearest Louisa! No, no, it were impossible. Not for worlds would I bring a tear into your eyes or change into gloom those smiles which now gleam so sweetly upon your lips. Ah! dearest Louisa, it is as if I were thy mother instead of thy sister that I am now talking to thee; and it is with such a feeling that I rejoice, oh, I rejoice unfeignedly, to be enabled to pour balm into thy wounded heart."

" Oh, dearest Clara," interrupted Louisa, surveying her sister with mingled amazement and suspense, " to what do you allude? Alas! you cannot as yet know my sorrows; because, when I sat down in Paris to commit them to paper

and send you an account of all that had occurred, the pen dropped from my hands. Yes, vainly did I commence letter after letter; each fresh attempt only rendered my heart's wounds more painful; it was like pouring molten lead upon the seared and lacerated flesh. Pardon me, therefore, dear sister, for having thus preserved a silence which may seem unkind, nay, even improper — "

"Enough, enough, dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, throwing her arms around her young sister's neck and drawing down that innocent head until it reposed upon her bosom; "from your lips I need no apology, no excuse, especially as I am well acquainted with much that has occurred. And to keep you no longer in suspense, let me assure you that Jocelyn is innocent."

"Innocent!" echoed Louisa, her own sweet lips thus repeating in ecstatic joy an assurance which other sweet lips had just breathed in tenderness; "innocent!" she repeated, raising her head suddenly from her sister's bosom, her looks beaming and glittering with mingled joy, hope, and suspense. "Oh, if this were true, if this were true!" and she clasped her hands with a gesture expressive of ineffable emotions.

"It is as I assure you, my beloved sister," rejoined Clara Stanley. "I would not deceive you for a moment in such a case; no, not for worlds would I deceive you where your heart's best and purest affections are engaged."

"Oh, this is happiness, this is happiness indeed!" murmured Louisa; and flinging herself into her sister's arms, she wept tears of love and gratitude and joy upon her bosom.

"Dear Louisa, this is the sweetest moment that I have experienced for months past," murmured Clara, in a voice that was tremulous and low.

And then she also wept; but we cannot say whether the tears that now streamed down her cheeks welled forth from feelings as unalloyed with pain and as unmixed with self-reproach as those which her sister experienced, — that fair, bright, and innocent sister whose tears were moistening Clara's heaving breast with their crystal purity.

"And are you sure, very sure of all this, dearest Clara?" inquired Louisa, again raising her head and bending upon her sister a countenance beaming with smiles of innocence

and delight. "But, oh, yes, I see that you are confident, and I will not ask you to repeat your assurance."

"Rely upon what I say, dearest Louisa," answered Clara. "If I were not thus confident upon the subject, I would not for a moment venture the assertion; if a doubt existed in my mind, I would rather have left you in the belief of your lover's infidelity than encourage a hope which, after all, might turn out to be delusive. Not only is your lover innocent, dearest Louisa, but he is one of the most injured and persecuted of men in all that concerns his imprisonment in the prefecture of police, and one of the most virtuous and honourable of young men in all that regards his fidelity toward you and the temptations to which he has been subjected."

"Oh, Jocelyn, Jocelyn! to think that I should have mistrusted thee so profoundly! to think that I should have wronged thee so immensely!" murmured Louisa, shaking her head in despair. "And yet Heaven knows that the circumstantial evidence which told against thee, Jocelyn, was to all appearances crushing and overwhelming. For did not the prefect himself assure me of dreadful things? Did I not behold with my own eyes a scene too well calculated to make me mistrust thee? Did I not even hear that female's voice proclaim her love for thee?"

"Ah! now, my dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, "you are torturing yourself with misgivings, in spite of the certainties which I have breathed in your ears. It is true that I am not acquainted with all the minute details of these matters to which you are alluding; but in general terms I can assure you that your lover is innocent, that he is even of the most rigid virtue, that his purity is incorruptible, and that whatever complexion circumstantial evidence may have been made to assume against him, he will be enabled to clear up everything."

"But one word more, Clara," exclaimed Louisa; "one word more, and then farewell to all misgivings. Is he really living under a false name?"

"Yes, that most assuredly he is," exclaimed the elder sister; "and to his honour and credit is this very fact which has been made not only the cause of his arrest, but also one of the grounds of his reproach. But I shall leave to him, Louisa, when the time comes, the duty of explaining to you

wherefore he has assumed this name of Jocelyn Loftus, and what his real name is. For I feel assured that these revelations will flow more sweetly upon your ears and sink down more deliciously into your heart when coming from the lips of a lover, even than from those of a fond and affectionate sister. And now one word more relative to Jocelyn, as we must still continue to call him — "

"Oh, what else have you to say upon this subject?" asked Louisa, with renewed suspense.

"That in a short time, a very short time, I hope, he will be free," returned Clara. "Indeed, I am convinced that he will soon be liberated; and then, dear girl, he will no doubt rejoice to give you all those explanations which must triumphantly prove his own innocence and dispel all the misgivings that still perhaps lurk in the depths of your soul."

"He will be free — oh, heavens! that there may be no disappointment or delay in the fulfilment of this hope!" exclaimed Louisa, once more clasping her hands and now gazing upward with a fervid enthusiasm, so that it was easy to perceive that in the depths of her soul she prayed to Heaven to verify her sister's assurance.

"Whatever I tell you, dearest Louisa, you may rely upon," rejoined Clara. "And now that I have relieved you from so much anxiety and changed your sorrow into heartfelt joy, you must give me all the particulars of what has occurred to you relative to that journey to Paris and this visit to London."

"I will tell you everything, dear sister," answered the young maiden. "You are well aware, from the letters which I have so constantly written to you, that in the month of September Jocelyn brought Miss Mary Owen with him from London and desired that she might find a home at the cottage?"

"Yes, while he proceeded to the Continent," said Clara, taking up the thread of her sister's discourse, "in order to defeat certain machinations which had been devised against the Princess of Wales, and in which the Owen family was concerned. On all these points your letters were explicit enough."

"And I also told you," continued Louisa, "that Jocelyn wrote to me a letter full of love and tenderness from the French capital, stating how he had arrived there in due

course and how he had fallen in with Mary's three sisters at Calais, whom he had escorted to Paris. I answered his welcome epistle; and he wrote to me another as affectionate as the first. But that was the last letter which I received from him, and then his correspondence suddenly ceased. This was at the end of September."

"And throughout the month of October," observed Clara, "your letters to me were mournful indeed. You seemed to fancy that your lover had altogether abandoned you — "

"No, no, dearest Clara," exclaimed Louisa, blushing. "I did not then suspect his fidelity; but I was afraid, indeed, I was haunted with the idea, that some terrible calamity had overtaken him."

"Well, and did I not send you all the consolation in my power?" asked Clara; "did I not conjure you to cherish hope and avoid despair, — although at the time Heaven knows that I was utterly ignorant of what had really become of your lover."

"Had it not been for your soothing and consolatory letters," said Louisa, "I should have become delirious with anguish, or else have been plunged into a blank despair. Well, in this manner did the month of October pass mournfully on; and just as it was drawing to a close, I received a letter, dated from Paris, and stating that it was of the highest consequence to me to repair thither without delay in order to learn certain calamitous truths relative to Jocelyn Loftus. That letter, which bore the signature of 'An Unknown Friend,' desired me to proceed at once to the British consul on my arrival in Paris, and he would give me further information. Conceive, my dear Clara, the state of mind into which this letter threw me; and, oh, you were not nigh to counsel me. I felt that it was wrong to leave our poor aunt to the care of a comparative stranger; but, on the other hand, it would have been madness or perhaps death for me to have remained at home, a prey to the most excruciating suspense."

"Poor girl!" said the elder sister, hastily wiping her eyes. "No, I was not there to succour you with my advice, although I ought to have been. But go on, Louisa, go on," she repeated, with a sort of nervous impatience. "I can understand full well how it was that you yielded to the

impulse of your feelings and resolved upon repairing to Paris. Under the circumstances I should have done the same; and therefore I do not blame you."

"Thank you, dear sister, thank you for that assurance," exclaimed Louisa, smiling through the tears which had started forth upon her lashes as she spoke of her aunt. "Yes, it is as you have said. Driven wild with fearful misgivings, half-frenzied and delirious, hurried along, as it were, by an overwhelming torrent of feeling, I became powerless for anything like calm deliberation. Mary Owen promised to bestow the most unwearied attention upon my aunt, and to take my place in all tender ministrations toward her. I knew that my young friend was kind-hearted, affectionate, and sincere, and I entertained not the slightest apprehension that our afflicted relation would experience neglect at her hands. Thus, after a few very brief preparations, my departure was taken hurriedly; and without any adventure worth relating, I arrived safely in Paris. Immediately on reaching the French capital, I repaired to the British consul; and when I mentioned my name, he treated me with a kindness of manner so fully reassuring and even paternal that I was struck with the idea that he himself must be the author of the letter which was signed by an unknown friend. But in this respect I was speedily undeceived; for, after a few observations to the purport that an excellent and kind-hearted English nobleman was really the author of that letter, and was interesting himself in my behalf, the consul directed me to a hotel close at hand, where I was to inquire for the Marquis of Leveson. You may well understand, my dear Clara, that the moment this name struck upon my ears it carried a vague and unknown terror into the depths of my soul; for although I had heard but little of this nobleman from the lips of Mary Owen, yet this little was not in his favour."

Here we must pause for a moment to remind our reader that when Jocelyn had introduced Mary Owen to the cottage at Canterbury, he had carefully forborne from mentioning to Louisa anything beyond the mere outline of the atrocious conspiracy that was afoot against the Princess of Wales. Especially did he avoid alluding to the infamous means which had been adopted to demoralize the minds of the fair daughters of Mrs. Owen; and Mary herself, with a proper

feeling of delicacy, never subsequently enlightened Louisa in that respect. Thus the reader will understand that when Louisa heard the name of the Marquis of Leveson mentioned by the British consul, she knew nothing of the worst phases of his character, but only that he was one of the prince regent's confederates in respect to the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales. These circumstances being duly borne in mind, it will be the more easy to comprehend the ensuing details of Louisa Stanley's narrative.

"Yes, on hearing that name of Leveson," she continued, after a brief pause, "I felt that it was indeed probable he might know something of Jocelyn and of Jocelyn's proceeding, since his lordship was so intimately connected with the machinations and designs of the prince and so well acquainted with the Misses Owen. Therefore, after thanking the British consul for his kindness, I at once repaired to the hotel which he had named; and on inquiring for the Marquis of Leveson, I was introduced to his presence. If you have ever seen him, Clara — "

"Yes, — I — I think I must have seen him," observed the elder sister, with a slight appearance of confusion. "But go on. What were you about to say? "

"I was on the point of observing that his lordship is an elderly, if not an old man," continued Louisa, "and his age, added to the paternal kindness with which he received me, naturally inspired me with confidence. Besides, I was too anxious to be relieved of my dreadful suspense relative to Jocelyn to give way to much misgiving on my own account; and as he doubtless saw by my looks how torturing that suspense was, he at once entered on the painful topic alluded to in his pseudonymous letter. After a suitable preface, he proceeded with every appearance of gentleness and considerate caution to unfold a long tale of charges and accusations against poor Jocelyn. Thus at his very first words I was so far relieved as to learn that the object of my affections had neither sustained personal injury nor was dead, between which calamities my frenzied fancy had been cruelly alternating. But, oh, if I were indeed relieved from that poignant suspense and excruciating alarm, it was only to hear sufficient to prove, as I then thought, that henceforth Jocelyn was unworthy of the love which I had bestowed upon him. Nevertheless I could not, I would not, I dared

not, put implicit faith in the bare word of the Marquis of Leveson, without corroboration and without proof. Nor did he for a moment appear to believe that I should rest satisfied with mere statements unsupported by evidence. He assured me that his only aim was to save me from becoming the victim of an adventurer, and that his conduct toward me was inspired by the feelings which a father might cherish toward a daughter. In a word, my dear Clara, he spoke so kindly, so reasonably, and so conscientiously, to all appearance, and then, too, I was so very, very unhappy, so lonely, and so much in want of a friend and adviser, that I readily promised to be guided by his counsel. He bade me remain at the hotel, assigning me to the care of the landlady and her daughters, who were worthy people, and seeing that I was unhappy, did their best to console me in my affliction. To be brief, the marquis took me late that same night in his carriage to the prefecture of police; and there, as it appeared to me, I received the fullest, the cruellest, and, oh, the most fatal confirmation of all that his lordship had previously told me."

Louisa Stanley now related to her sister the details of all that she had heard or seen at the prefecture of police, and which are already well known to the reader.

" My dearest girl," said Clara, " I have already told you that your intended husband does really bear a false name, but that he has assumed it through no dishonourable motives. Therefore, the entry in the prefect's Black Book is virtually nothing more or less than a record of a base pretext for a most arbitrary arrest. That the prefect should have repeated to you the calumnies previously levelled against Jocelyn by the Marquis of Leveson can be explained either by supposing the French functionary to be as vile as the English nobleman himself, or else to have been easily misled and deceived by that nobleman. Then, with regard to the third incident which appeared to you a corroborative proof of Jocelyn's perfidy, namely, the occurrences of the prison-chambers, all this doubtless arose from circumstances purposely arranged and cunningly combined at a special moment to produce particular effects. There was an aperture, you say, in the wall between two chambers, and you were led to believe that this aperture had been formed as a means of communication and intercourse between Jocelyn and

the female captive who was his neighbour. But, ah! Louisa, did you pause to ascertain that Jocelyn was a guilty wretch instead of a victim, the creator of the circumstances in which you found him placed or the victim of them? In fine, had he invited that female to his chamber, or had she forced herself upon him? You tell me that when you heard him speak within that second chamber whence the light streamed through the aperture, his words were an ejaculation to the effect that he should be driven mad. But was that the cry of love or of despair? Was that the language of a passion traitorous to you, or of a bitter persecution endured by himself? And then, that response from the female to the effect that she loved him and that he knew she thus loved him, — might it not have been addressed to him as a reproach and a remonstrance for coldness, aversion, or inaccessibility on his part? Depend upon it, Louisa, as I ere now said, Jocelyn will give, when you meet again, the fullest and most satisfactory explanations upon all these points."

"Yes, dearest Clara," answered Louisa, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "I indeed see all those incidents in a new light. But what could I think of them at the time? Oh, I was stricken down as if the hand of death had suddenly been laid upon me; I was borne away from the spot, and for several days I remained in a state of delirium at the hotel. But the kindest attentions were shown me by the landlady, her daughters, and the medical attendant; and thus, when my mind began to emerge from the wild confusion of its ideas, I found myself the object of the tenderest solace and sympathy. I wished to hasten back to England, to return home; but the marquis represented to me the impossibility of my travelling in the nervous and excited condition that I then was, and this representation was warmly seconded by the worthy females to whose care I was assigned. Weak as I was in body and attenuated as I felt in mind, I was overpersuaded without much difficulty. And I have already told you, Clara, how vain were the attempts I made to commit my woes to paper and correspond with you. Thus did day after day pass; and all this while the conduct of the marquis was so kind, so respectful, and at the same time so fatherly, that I felt assured his character must either have been mistaken or unjustly treated by Mary Owen. To be brief, I experienced the deepest gratitude toward

his lordship; I felt that I was indebted to him for being rescued from the snares and influences of an adventurer. But, oh, while thus I thought in a strain so depreciatory of poor Jocelyn, the scalding tears flowed down my cheeks and I felt as if my heart would burst. It was a relief for me to quit Paris, that place which appeared to be the scene of the fatal rock on which all my fondest hopes were shipwrecked. The marquis, with a delicacy which entirely confirmed the good opinion I had recently been forming of him, arranged that the landlady's eldest daughter should accompany us as far as Dover, so that I might not be left without female society during the journey. On arriving at Dover, this young Frenchwoman left us to return to Paris, liberally rewarded by the marquis. Up to this moment, Clara, the idea of proceeding to London had never entered my mind. But as I was journeying with the marquis from Dover to Canterbury, he represented to me the propriety and even the necessity of consulting my sister, — yourself, beloved Clara, — and pouring my sorrows into her bosom after all that had occurred. Ah! need I tell you, need I assure you that it required but little argument to persuade me in the adoption of this course? I nevertheless insisted upon halting at Canterbury to assure myself that our afflicted aunt was properly cared for. 'Mary Owen,' then said the marquis, 'is deeply prejudiced against me, and fancies that I am engaged in a conspiracy which has no other existence than in her own imagination. She will therefore believe, if you tell her you are travelling with me, that I shall snatch her away from her present retreat and bear her back to her mother. But as I do not wish to interfere with the poor girl, it will be needless for you to create any alarm in her mind. Would it not, then, be prudent to forbear from mentioning my name to her at all?' I yielded to these representations, which appeared to me so natural at the moment; and, besides, my mind was so attenuated that I really had neither the courage nor the power to think for myself, and was therefore easily led to follow any advice that was given to me at the moment by one whom I deemed a friend. I went to the cottage; I learned privately from the faithful servant-girl that Mary Owen had filled my place with the utmost tenderness toward my afflicted aunt, and Mary Owen herself gave me the

assurance that she had neglected nothing in the fulfilment of the duty entrusted to her. Few and rapid were the words that passed between us. I told her that Jocelyn was faithless to me, and a mere adventurer in society. I told her also that her sisters had proceeded to join the Princess of Wales in Italy; and I assured her that I had the best possible means for believing that the conspiracy against that august lady had in reality no actual existence. Mary Owen was astonished at this declaration on my part; she shook her head gloomily, but evidently was at a loss what to think. I told her to suspend all opinion until my return from London, when I would enter into the fullest and minutest details. Then, after this flying visit to the cottage — a visit which lasted for a brief half-hour — I returned to the Fountain Hotel, where the Marquis of Leveson's carriage had stopped. Our journey was then pursued toward London, where we arrived last evening."

Louisa Stanley now proceeded to relate the treatment she had experienced at Leveson House, — how the marquis and Ernestina had suddenly thrown off the mask, and how the seasonable and sudden arrival of Sir Douglas Huntingdon had saved her from the treachery and outrage which the profligate nobleman had dared to contemplate. The elder sister was more than indignant, she was positively enraged at hearing this recital of the crowning dangers through which Louisa had that morning passed, and she murmured to herself, " Lord Leveson shall repent of this black atrocity! "

" And now, dearest Clara," said Louisa, throwing her arms around her sister's neck, and gazing upon her with all her young heart's innocent and enthusiastic devotion, " tell me, dearest Clara, are you yourself happy? Do you like the gaiety and bustle of the metropolis, or do you long to return to the peaceful retreat at Canterbury? Tell me, in fine, all, everything that regards you."

" Yes, dearest Louisa," answered Clara, embracing her fondly, " I will tell you everything, and you will perceive that I have all possible reason to be happy. In fact, dearest Louisa, if I have kept until some such occasion as this, — I mean, until we should thus meet and I could speak to you concerning many, many things which I could not so well have committed to paper, — if I have kept all this till now, I say, you will not be angry."

" Ah! my dearest sister, you have made me so happy," cried Louisa, " by your assurances relative to Jocelyn, that I am in a humour to behold everything in this world in the brightest and gayest colours. Yes, a roseate atmosphere now appears to surround me, displacing the murky mist in which I have been living, breathing, moving, and also losing myself, as it were, for the last fortnight. Tell me, then, that you are happy, dearest Clara; and that assurance, coming from your lips, will enhance, oh, unspeakably enhance, the joy which I myself now feel. Yes, and I shall be the more happy, too, if it be possible, because such assurance will convince me that you, my dearest sister, have not experienced the blighting, withering influence of that atmosphere of fashion in which you have been moving."

" What mean you, Louisa? " asked Clara, gazing upon her sister with so singular an expression that had the young maiden been more experienced in the world's ways, and more deeply read in the science of the human heart, she would immediately have felt uneasy, perhaps dismayed, by that look which Clara fixed upon her.

" I mean," responded the artless, innocent, unsuspecting girl, " that Lady Ernestina Dysart drew ere now such a shocking picture of fashionable life that she made me shudder."

" Ah! what did she tell you? " inquired Clara.

" Oh, it was indeed very shocking," answered Louisa, " and filled me with a sudden aversion for what is called the fashionable world. Lady Ernestina spoke to me of a certain celebrated beauty — I forget her name at this moment — "

" Try and remember," said Clara, throwing her arm in such a way around Louisa's neck that she drew the young virgin's beauteous head down upon her own fine bust.

" Oh, I recollect now," cried Louisa; " it was Venetia Trelawney."

" Ah! " said Clara. " And what did Lady Ernestina tell you about her? "

" That she was as depraved as she was beautiful," replied Louisa, whose cheek still remained pillowed against Clara's bosom. " But doubtless you are acquainted with everything regarding this Venetia, since her story appears to be the topic of the fashionable world. Only conceive such

dreadful depravity as to marry a young, handsome, and clever man, and immediately after the honeymoon lend a willing ear to the improper overtures of that wicked, wicked man the prince regent! Oh, Clara, if you ever meet this Venetia, — or Lady Sackville, as I believe she is now called, — I do sincerely hope you will never speak to her. It positively makes my cheeks glow with indignation and also with shame when I think that the entire sex to some extent shares in the infamy of such creatures. Ah! and your cheeks glow also, my beloved Clara," exclaimed the beauteous girl, suddenly raising her head and observing the deep carnation which overspread her sister's countenance. "Oh, I was well aware that your noble heart would feel as indignant and also as humiliated as I, to think that the name of woman should be disgraced by such a shameless profligate as that Venetia."

"Let us talk no more of this," said Clara, the deep carnation hue suddenly sweeping away from her cheeks and leaving them very pale. "Yes, yes, the atmosphere of London is indeed unfitted for a flower of innocence and purity such as thou, and therefore must we part soon, dear sister, and you must lose no time in returning to Canterbury. Sir Douglas Huntingdon's carriage will take you to Blackheath or Dartford, where you can obtain a post-chaise; and as it is now but two o'clock, you will reach Canterbury to-night ere it be very late."

"You seem, dear Clara, as if you wished to hurry me suddenly away?" said Louisa, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"No, do not think me unkind, my sweet sister," returned Clara; "but I feel that London is not fitted for you. Oh, no, it is not fitted for you — and God in His mercy forbid that it ever should be," added Clara, with a strong emphasis.

"Well, dear sister," observed the younger girl, as she wiped away her tears, "I will do as you desire. But recollect that you have not as yet told me one word relative to yourself; and you ere now led me to believe that you had many things to tell me, — yes, even secrets, which you had not chosen to commit to paper, but for which you awaited the opportunity of our meeting."

"Oh, I have nothing to tell you of such great importance as you seem to imagine," said Clara, with a smile, which did

not, however, appear to take its inspiration from the full glow of a heart's unalloyed happiness. "You know that fond, loving, and affectionate sisters such as we are always have a hundred little trifles and sweet nothings to tell each other, and which they treasure up for the day of meeting."

"Then you have really nothing of importance to tell me?" said Louisa, with a tone and look of disappointment. "I thought you were perhaps going to reveal to me some matters indicative of your own complete and consummate happiness."

"No — that is to say — I mean yes," ejaculated Clara, somewhat falteringly; then, in a hurried tone, she added, "But I have already told you, by the bye, in my letters, that my dear kind friends, the Beckfords, have adopted me as their daughter, and intend to leave me all their fortune."

"Yes, you have already told me this," said Louisa, "and I have congratulated you in return; for of course you are well aware, Clara, that your happiness is as dear to me as my own, or even dearer, for I would endure anything sooner than be compelled to hear that you were unhappy."

"Dear Louisa, dear, dear girl," cried Clara, embracing her fervidly and fondly; "and be assured, oh, be assured that I entertain precisely the same feeling for you. But we must now part, Louisa, we must indeed; for it is time that you should return homeward, and I am also compelled to leave town again immediately to rejoin Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, otherwise I would accompany you part of the distance. But I repeat, Sir Douglas Huntingdon will escort you in his carriage as far as Blackheath, or perhaps Dartford, where he will see you safe in a post-chaise."

The sisters now separated with many reiterated embraces, and also with many, many tears; and once more was Louisa consigned to the care of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. We need only add that the baronet fulfilled his mission with delicacy and fidelity. He escorted her to Dartford, where he procured a post-chaise for her accommodation; and on parting from the lovely girl he experienced a sensation of ineffable joy to think that he had never once regarded her otherwise than with the utmost respect. 'Tis said that the lion crouches at the feet of a spotless maiden; and assuredly the gay libertine, the lion of human society, acknowledged the

power of virtue and the empire of innocence on the present occasion.

Louisa reached home between ten and eleven o'clock at night, without experiencing any further adventure worthy recording; but it was far otherwise with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as will appear in the following chapter.

CHAPTER XXX

SHOOTER'S HILL

HAVING acquitted himself thus honourably of the duty confided to him, the baronet remained to dine at the principal hotel at Dartford; and as his horses had done good service during the day, they required ample leisure for bait and rest. He did not therefore hurry himself as to the hour of departure; and, moreover, he fell in with agreeable company in the coffee-room of the tavern. For there had been a steeplechase in the neighbourhood in the morning; and several sporting characters who had taken part in the barbarian "amusement" were now winding up the day's diversions with a good dinner and a jovial glass at the hotel. The baronet, who liked such company and loved his bottle also, was therefore induced to remain with the convivialists until a somewhat late hour; indeed, it was considerably past ten o'clock when he ordered his carriage to be got ready, and another half-hour elapsed ere he had finished his wine, paid his bill, and set out on the journey homeward.

The footman who was in attendance on the vehicle sat next the coachman on the box; and as the night was very dark, the carriage-lamps had been lighted. But a dense mist, arising from the Thames, was borne by a sluggish northerly breeze over the southern bank of the river, enveloping the main road which the equipage was pursuing. The lamps accordingly shone as dimly as if through the dullest ground glass; and the feeble glimmering thus thrown forth was barely sufficient to enable the coachman to avoid the hedges, banks, ditches, or fences which by turns skirted the road.

The carriage accordingly proceeded at a leisurely pace; and Sir Douglas sank into a sound sleep under the influence

of the liquor he had imbibed at Dartford. It was close upon midnight when the equipage began the long, tedious, and gloomy ascent of Shooter's Hill, that spot which, until a very recent period, was so memorable for the exploits of highwaymen. Still the baronet dozed on upon the comfortable cushions of the carriage; but all in a moment he was startled from his sleep by the abrupt stoppage of the vehicle, followed by the instantaneous plunging of the horses, together with several rough voices speaking menacingly.

Letting down the window, the baronet became aware that his carriage was attacked by robbers; and having no weapons of any kind with him, he was unable to offer the slightest resistance. Besides which, the night was of such impenetrable gloom that he could literally see nothing of what was going on; but the voices which he heard enabled him to comprehend in a moment that his servants were overpowered, and that the ruffians were menacing them with death if they dared make any further noise.

Thus far all that had happened since the baronet was startled from his nap was the work of a few seconds; and putting forth his hand, he was about to open the door when a couple of fellows came up to the window. One of them immediately seized the carriage-lamp on that side, and thrust it into the vehicle, turning it in such a way that its light fell full upon the baronet's countenance.

"He's a good-natured-looking feller," said one, in a gruff voice; "and so I suppose he'll stand summut handsome."

"To be sure he will, Bob," answered the other ruffian. "Now, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Sir Douglas, "your watch, your rings, your diamond breast-pin, and, as a matter of course, your purse. If not by fair means, we will have them by foul," and he placed a double-barrelled pistol so close to the baronet's forehead as to cause him to tremble in spite of himself.

"Now, then, be quick, you sir," said the other ruffian, who had been addressed as Bob. "Don't frighten the genelman out of his senses, Buttoner."

"Well, I don't want to, if so be he'll only make haste," observed the individual thus addressed, as he withdrew the pistol from the close vicinage of the baronet's countenance.

Sir Douglas, perceiving that resistance was vain, nevertheless hoped that if he could only keep the villains in parley, succour might arrive.

"Now, my good fellows," he accordingly said, surveying their countenances by the dim light of the carriage-lamp, and observing that one was a villainous-looking man with a black patch over the eye, and that the other, who was called the Buttoner, was a jovial, well-favoured person, "now, my good fellows, I am quite ready to surrender up everything I have about me, if you like; but as I value my watch and my rings, I will pay you a fairer price for their ransom than you will get for them if you take them from me."

"Well, let's first look at the purse," said Bob, the fellow with the black patch over his eye, and who was no other than the Durrynacker to whom the reader was introduced at Bencull's dark crib.

The baronet accordingly drew forth his purse, which was found to contain something more than twelve guineas.

"Well, this here ain't no great shakes," cried the Buttoner. "I say, Ben," he exclaimed, raising his voice and turning his head away from the window, "the genelman proposes a compromise for the yack, the fawneys, and so on."

"Well, let it be so," said a hoarse, thick voice in reply; and this indeed was none other than Mr. Bencull speaking, and who was mounting guard on the box over the coachman and footman.

"Wery good," said the Buttoner. "Now, sir, please to step down," and thus speaking, he opened the door of the carriage and lowered the steps.

"But where am I to go?" demanded the baronet.

"Never do you mind," answered the Buttoner; "come along with us, that's all."

"Oh, if it be necessary to go any distance, I would sooner give up my personal property at once," said the baronet, who had thus involved himself in a dilemma which he little anticipated when proposing the compromise; "or else, can I not write you a cheque upon my banker on a leaf torn out of my pocketbook?"

"No, no, sir, we don't do business in that way," responded the Buttoner, sharply. "You was the first to propose the compromise, and therefore we'll stick to it. Now then, how

is it to be? " he demanded, again appealing to his confederate on the box.

" Oh, let your young woman manage it," replied Bencull.

" Be it so," said the Buttoner; then addressing himself in hasty and imperious terms to the baronet, he continued: " Now, sir, you will give your servants orders to pay a hundred guineas to the bearer of a letter from you to that effect to-morrow morning, and you will tell them that if so be the young woman doesn't come back with the money by one o'clock to-morrow afternoon, we shall take it for granted that there's been foul play and that she's been took into custody; so that without more ado we shall draw a knife across your throat. Do you understand, sir? "

" Yes, yes, perfectly well," replied the baronet, uncommonly annoyed at the turn the adventure was taking, and inwardly cursing himself for not having surrendered up his jewelry without the suggestion of a compromise. " But you surely don't intend to hold me as a hostage until to-morrow afternoon? " he said, in a tone that betrayed his vexation.

" By jingo, but we do, though," exclaimed the Buttoner. " So no more palaver, but give your orders to your servants, and let the carriage depart."

" Well, since there is no help for it, be it as you say," observed the baronet, with a philosophical resignation to an adventure which, after all, threatened to be more inconvenient than perilous. Then, addressing himself to the footman, he said, " James, you have heard what has taken place, and you will tell the housekeeper to pay the hundred guineas to any person who shall present a letter from me to-morrow morning to that effect. You will likewise tell Mrs. Baines that the person presenting such letter is to receive no molestation nor hindrance."

The footman promised a faithful attention to his master's orders; whereupon Bencull relieved that lackey and the coachman from the terrors of his presence on the box and the imminence of his pistols, and the instant he alighted the carriage drove rapidly away.

The whole of this scene did not occupy above five minutes, the colloquy which has taken us so long to record having passed with all the haste and hurry of the accompanying excitement.

And now, while the carriage was proceeding on its course,

with the coachman and lackey congratulating themselves on their escape, the baronet was seized upon by the three ruffians and hurried into the thicket skirting that side of the road which was farthest from the Thames. Through the deep, impenetrable darkness did the robbers conduct their captive, to whom it was evident, by the rapid and unhesitating pace at which they advanced, that they were perfectly familiar with the locality. Such indeed was the case; for they were pursuing a beaten pathway through the wood, and in which they were enabled to keep with precision, inasmuch as the sinking of their feet on the damp ground on either side at once made them aware when there was the slightest divergence from that well-trodden path.

For upwards of a quarter of an hour did they thus proceed at a rapid rate. No violence was offered to the baronet; but a firm grasp was kept upon him, in order to prevent his escape. Scarcely a word was spoken as they thus proceeded through that night of pitchy gloom; and at the expiration of the interval just named, a dim light was observed twinkling a little ahead. In two or three minutes the party halted suddenly at the door of what appeared to be a cottage, or hut, and whence the light had emanated.

The door was opened by another ill-looking rascal, who, we may as well observe at once, was the Mushroom Faker, another of the delectable company whose acquaintance our readers have made at Jacob's Island.

The baronet was now introduced into a rude and dilapidated room, furnished with one or two benches and a couple of tables made of the roughest materials. The entire aspect of the place was of the most wretched and cheerless description. On one table stood a bottle, a glass, a plate, and a huge knife with a buckhorn handle; for the Mushroom Faker had only just concluded his supper at the moment when his companions arrived with their captive.

"Sit down, sir," said the Buttoner, "and make yourself at home. I suppose there's some kind of lush here," he continued, taking up the bottle and holding it against the flame of a tallow candle with a long flaring wick. "Yes, to be sure there is," and filling the glass with brandy he tossed the dram down his throat. "Now, sir, pray help yourself to this here lush, and I can promise you'll find it

excellent. In fact, you must make yourself as comfortable as you can, while I go and see what my young woman can do toward accommodating you for the night."

The baronet made no reply, but threw a look of bitter annoyance around the room, and of disgust upon the Buttoner; then seating himself on a rough stool at the clumsy table, he once more endeavoured to soothe his annoyance and resign himself to the temporary inconveniences of his position.

The Buttoner opened a small door and ascended a narrow staircase, which creaked and groaned beneath his heavy tread, while Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker sat down at the second table and began drinking as fast and furiously as if they had never tasted strong waters before in their lives. It was, notwithstanding, pretty evident that there was no lack of the alcoholic fluid in the hut, as indeed the numerous bottles which appeared on the shelves of an open cupboard satisfactorily proved.

In a few minutes the Buttoner came down-stairs again, and presenting a sheet of paper, writing materials, and sealing-wax to the baronet, he said, "Now, sir, you'll please to draw up at once that there letter which is to be delivered to your housekeeper, Mrs. Baines, as I think you called her; 'cos why, my young woman will get up precious early in the morning, so as to be at your house in town, wherever it is, by eight or nine o'clock."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately proceeded to pen the requisite instructions for the payment of the hundred guineas to the bearer; and having affixed his signature to the letter, he was about to seal it when the Buttoner leaned over his shoulder, observing in a coarse tone of familiarity, "Beg pardon, sir, but I must see what you have wrote, if you please."

"By all means," observed the baronet, scarcely attempting to conceal his disgust. "But if you did not mean me to close the letter, why did you bring the sealing-wax?"

"I fancied you would raythe seal it," was the reply; "so that when delivered at your door, to-morrow morning, it won't be read by no one but her as it is addressed to. But all this isn't no reason why I shouldn't see aforehand what the letter really contains. Howsumever, it's all right, and so now you can seal it."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly secured the letter; and having duly addressed it to Mrs. Baines, his housekeeper in London, he gave it into the hands of the Buttoner. This individual once more hurried up the narrow rickety staircase, at the top of which was a bedroom, if a place with a quantity of dirty flock scattered upon the floor, a wretched coverlid, a rudely constructed table, a chipped basin, and a cracked ewer deserves such an appellation.

In this wretched apartment Nell Gibson was seated. A bottle of spirits and a glass stood upon the table; and as the light of the solitary candle played flickeringly upon her countenance, it showed that her features were slightly flushed with drinking. Her apparel was in striking contrast with the miserable aspect of the place. She wore gold earrings; a silk bodice, fitting close to her shape, displayed the luxuriant proportions of her figure; her arms were bare to the shoulder, and the short skirts of her dress revealed her well-formed ankles up to the swell of the leg. A handsome bonnet and scarf lay upon the bench where she was seated; and when the Buttoner reappeared this second time in the chamber, she was counting a few guineas which she had taken from a new silk purse.

We have already informed our readers that there had been a grand steeplechaise in the neighbourhood that morning; and great numbers of persons had been attracted to the vicinage of Shooter's Hill, not only from the adjacent towns of Dartford, Woolwich, and Greenwich, but also from the metropolis. To take advantage of this opportunity of displaying their particular genius and exercising their craft, Bencull, the Durrynacker, the Buttoner, and Nell Gibson had appeared upon the scene; while the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling had likewise paid a visit to the same neighbourhood and for the same purpose. Of course the two parties had thus met in pursuance of previous arrangement; but we shall not pause to describe the various ways in which all these worthies, male and female, turned the proceedings of the day and the presence of a large concourse of people to their own special advantage. Suffice it to say that they managed to reap a very tolerable harvest; and when evening came the two parties took a very friendly leave of each other. On the one hand, Daniel Coffin, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling repaired to

a small, lonely but convenient ale-house at a short distance amongst the fields, to take up their quarters till morning; while, on the other hand, Bencull, the Buttoner, the Durrynacker, and Nell Gibson had already arranged to pass the night at the rude hut in the immediate vicinage of Shooter's Hill.

Now this hut belonged to no less a personage than the Mushroom Faker. The reader will scarcely require to be told that it was a very convenient haunt for such personages as those just named; and accordingly, when business was slack at Jacob's Island, they often sought the rude hut for the purpose of seeing what they could pick up by nights on Shooter's Hill. It was also a retreat for any member of the fraternity whom circumstances compelled to " keep out of the way " for awhile; and suspicion was averted from the place by the maintenance of an air of the most abject poverty. The gamekeepers of the district fancied that it was occupied only by a poor inoffensive umbrella-mender, who was frequently absent on long journeys; whereas, in reality, it was the scene of many crimes and the hiding-place of many criminals.

We need only add in explanation of present incidents that Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Buttoner, flushed with the success of their proceedings amongst the crowds collected for the steeplechase in the morning, had resolved not to allow the night to pass without " trying their luck " on Shooter's Hill. Hence the stoppage of the baronet's carriage, and the circumstances which led to his introduction to the hut.

We stated that upon ascending the stairs a second time the Buttoner found Nell Gibson counting her money; and as he tossed her the letter which he had just received from the baronet down-stairs, he said, " Here, gal, is the dokiment that will produce a hundred guineas to-morrow morning."

" So much the better," observed the young woman, with a smile of satisfaction; " this is something like a night's adventure. Let me see, there's five of us: that will be twenty guineas apiece; because although you and me are now as good as one, yet we go shares as two."

" Oh, to be sure," said the Buttoner; " that's understood. You'll have to start off precious early in the morning, Nell,

so as to deliver that letter by eight or nine o'clock, and make sure of the money. Not that it matters much, so far as the swell cove hisself is concerned, for we don't mean to part with him quite so easy. In fact," added the Buttoner, lowering his voice to a whisper, "we don't mean to part with him at all."

"Then what do you mean?" asked Nell, in her usually quiet way, as if it were impossible for her to be surprised, startled, or alarmed by any announcement that could be made or any plan that could be revealed.

"Why, the swell cove has got such a handsome yack and chain, such beautiful fawneys, and such a sweet breast-pin, besides which, his toggery is so precious good, that it would raly be a sin to let such wallyables slip through our fingers. And therefore," added the Buttoner, in a still lower whisper and with an ominous look, "we mean to put him wery comfortably out of the way. Besides, dead men tell no tales, and since he has seen all our precious faces and would have no trouble in recognizing us again, it's much better to give him his gruel."

"Who is he?" asked Nell Gibson. "Do you know his name? Because if he happens to be any great person, there would be such a precious piece of work that no stone would be left unturned till his fate was discovered."

"To be sure I know who he is," returned the Buttoner. "You don't think I should have been fool enough to let him seal up that there letter afore I read it through? But I say, Nell, you don't object to having this swell cove made away with, do ye?"

"Not I indeed," returned this young woman, who beneath a handsome exterior concealed the implacable and remorseless spirit of a fiend. "And even supposing I did object, I know very well that if Bencull has once made up his mind, neither heaven nor earth could move him to the contrary."

"Well, he has, then, I can tell you," returned the Buttoner; "for although not a word has passed our lips on the subject, yet me and him and the Durrynacker and Mushroom Faker have settled the pint with our looks."

"I suppose you will wait till I come back to-morrow to say whether I have got the money or not?" observed Nell Gibson.

"There's no use waiting at all," answered the Buttoner.

"Whether he's alive or dead at eight o'clock to-morrow morning won't make no difference in your getting the money; and as for sticking a knife in a feller in cold blood during the daytime, I raly couldn't do it. It's all wery well at night, when one has had plenty of lush to make one plucky — "

"Well, you know best, and it's quite the same to me," interrupted Nell Gibson, with a yawn. "But, after all, you haven't told me what his name is," she observed, carelessly, as she turned the letter over and over in her hand.

"Douglas Huntingdon the signature is," answered the Buttoner. "But what's the matter, Nell?" he demanded, as she suddenly dropped the letter on the floor.

"Nothing. Why do you ask?" she inquired, stooping down to pick up the letter. Then, having done so, she looked up in the Buttoner's face, saying, "Why did you ask me that question, I repeat?"

"Because I thought you started and looked queer all of a sudden," was the response.

"Not I indeed," she observed, in an offhand manner, as she steadily met the keen, searching gaze which the Buttoner fixed upon her for a few moments. "Do you think he suspects he is in any danger?" she asked; "because if so it would be well to lull him into security."

"That's just what I want," responded the Buttoner. "I shouldn't like for us all to have to set upon him while's he awake, and so massacre him, as one may say. I had much rayther that he would lie down and go to sleep, and then we could do his business all quiet and comfortable without leaving no telltale stains about the place. In fact, I told him just now that I would come up-stairs and see what accommodation my young woman could make for him."

"Well, why don't you go and tell him he can have a bedroom, such as it is?" said Nell Gibson. "Or I tell you what," she added, a thought suddenly appearing to strike her, "if you like I'll go down-stairs and invite him to come up here."

"Well, do so if you fancy you'll succeed," replied the Buttoner. "There's no harm in trying it on."

"No harm at all," echoed Nell Gibson; and with this observation she descended to the room below, the Buttoner remaining up-stairs.

The moment she made her appearance in the lower apartment she threw a rapid look of intelligence upon Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker, who were boozing at one table, while she advanced toward the baronet, who was still seated at the other. The three villains understood by this look that she had some project in hand, and they therefore affected to take no particular notice of her. This was precisely what she wanted; her object was to divert their attention, or, at all events, cause them to look aside for a moment, while she had an opportunity of making a sign of intelligence to the baronet. Indeed, had she not by such a sign enjoined him to hold his peace, an exclamation of astonishment would have burst from his lips; for Nell Gibson was indeed no stranger to him, and he had instantaneously recognized her.

Yes, her form was fuller and grosser, her looks were bolder, and her mien was more brazen than when he saw her last; nevertheless, he failed not to recognize in an instant that countenance which he had once admired, and that form whose virgin charms had been despoiled by him.

The ejaculation, then, of amazement which was about to burst forth died upon his lips as he caught that signal which she made him; and instantly perceiving by her manner that she had in view some purpose which she wished to conceal from the ruffians at the other end of the room, he suddenly assumed an air of perfect composure, so as not to betray that any secret intelligence existed between them.

"You are sure, sir," she said, holding up the letter, "that this document will meet with proper attention to-morrow morning?"

"I am certain of it," he replied. "The men who brought me hither overheard the instructions which I gave to my servants ere they departed with the carriage —"

But while Sir Douglas Huntingdon was thus speaking, Nell Gibson said, in a low, rapid whisper, "Fly hence, I conjure you!"

Startling as these words were, inasmuch as they revealed to him in a moment all the dangers of his position, he nevertheless had the presence of mind to continue speaking the sentence which we have recorded; and thus his voice drowned the whispered accents of the female.

"Well, sir," she said, aloud, as if in answer to the observation which he had made, "I do hope that it will not be a wild-goose chase that I shall have to-morrow morning. And now, sir, as you have got to stay here all night, I am sent to propose that you walk up-stairs and lie down."

But as she thus spoke, she gave a slight and just perceptible shake of the head, as much as to tell him not to accept her offer.

"Thank you, young woman," he said, aloud, with a look which showed that he not only experienced a full sense of the danger of which she had made him aware, but likewise the deepest gratitude toward herself, "thank you, young woman, I would rather not. Presently, when I feel tired, I will avail myself of the offer."

And while Sir Douglas was thus speaking, in such a manner as perfectly to cover Nell's whispered accents, she breathed, in the lowest tone, the following words: "The door is not fastened — watch your opportunity — seize that knife — and escape!" Then, immediately afterward, she said, aloud, and in a calm, placid voice, "Would you like anything to eat, sir? We have provisions in the place, and because you are a prisoner for a few hours, there's no reason why you should be starved."

"No, I thank you, I require nothing," responded the baronet; and as he threw a rapid, furtive, sidelong glance toward the three men at the other end of the room, he saw in the sinister signs they were making together a horrible confirmation of the dire alarms which Nell Gibson had excited in his breast.

"I wish you good night, sir," she said; and darting upon him another look of intelligence, she turned away.

Ascending the staircase to the chamber above, she reappeared in the presence of the Buttoner, who was paying his respects to the brandy bottle there.

"Well, gal, I see it's no use," he observed. "The swell cove wouldn't be enticed up here, eh?"

"But he doesn't suspect anything wrong," returned the young woman, with the most perfect composure of countenance. "It is quite clear he fancies himself safe enough from danger, and that he will be let loose again to-morrow when I come back with the money."

She then sat down by the side of the Buttoner, with an

air as composed and self-possessed as if she had betrayed nothing of the contemplated horrors.

In the meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon had remained sitting at the table in the apartment below. Cold, ice-cold was the tremor that seized upon him as he reflected on the appalling perils by which he was surrounded. Though no coward, he could not help shrinking in dismay from the chasm on the brink of which he appeared to stand. As he glanced furtively around upon the three men who were boozing at the other table, he fancied that murder was written upon their very countenances. Averting his eyes in dread horror, he cast them down upon the floor; and, behold! they settled on stains which instantaneously struck him to be those of blood. His looks were startled away from that hideous point of view; and as they swept in frightened rapidity around, they caught other stains upon the wooden wall, which likewise appeared to be the marks of blood.

Shuddering to the very confines of his being, the baronet felt as if he were indeed looking death face to face. The pitchy darkness of the night that hung like a sable pall against the cottage-window, the awful stillness that prevailed around, the utter loneliness of that hut, the evil reputation of the neighbourhood, the deep solemn hour of midnight, and then those villainous countenances, which seemed more sinister and diabolical still as the faint, flickering light played upon them, — all these influences and circumstances combined to fill his soul with a fearful consternation and a horrible dismay.

Scarce a quarter of an hour had elapsed since he had refused in disgust the dram of brandy which the Buttoner had offered to him; but now he hastened to pour it out and greedily swallow it, to revive his drooping courage. In a moment the burning fluid appeared to flash like lightning through his veins; it was the spark to a whole train of excitement which had been subdued for a few minutes by the weight of an overwhelming consternation.

Yes, all was now haste in his thoughts, hurry in his ideas, a dizzy whirl in his brain. The red right arm of murder seemed to be extended over him; the gleaming blade appeared to be ready to plunge down into his heart; and his eyes swept wildly around to assure himself that the

ruffians were not already standing behind him or creeping stealthily toward him. No, they were still seated at the table, drinking and talking. The man Bencull had thrown off his coat and appeared in his shirt-sleeves. This in reality was because the night was close, the room was hot, and much liquor had made him feverish; but to the excited imagination of Sir Douglas Huntingdon it appeared as if the fellow were preparing himself to do the work of murder, as a butcher prepares for the slaughter of an ox; and now, wrought up to a pitch of desperation, the baronet snatched up the knife, made but one bound from his seat to the door, lifted the latch, and darted forth into the pitchy blackness of the night.

With ejaculations of amazement and fury, Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker rushed after the fugitive; and those cries of rage, reaching the chamber above, told Nell Gibson that the baronet had escaped, and startled the Buttoner with the conviction that something was wrong. Rushing down the stairs, he found the lower room empty and the door wide open; and he was about to dart forth and join in the pursuit when an idea that flashed to his brain struck him, as it were, with the sudden blow of a hammer, and made him stop short in the midst of his furious excitement, as a drunken man is sobered all in a moment by some fearful announcement.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FAIR STRANGER

The thought which thus suddenly arrested the steps of the Buttoner and transfixed him to the spot was that Nell Gibson had betrayed the murderous project to the baronet.

Our readers will remember a certain conversation which took place a fortnight previously to the present date of our story between Bencull and the Hangman relative to the employment of Nell Gibson to lead Larry Sampson into a trap. It will likewise be borne in mind that "to make sure doubly sure," in a scheme of so dangerous and delicate a character, they had resolved to plant the Buttoner as a spy upon Nell Gibson's actions. Being well provided with cash and good clothes, the Buttoner had found these proofs of prosperity to be immediate passports to the favour of Miss Gibson; and he accordingly took up his abode with her at Mrs. Young's delectable establishment in Bermondsey. He and Nell were therefore living as husband and wife together; and we have already shown how it was that they happened to be at the hut near Shooter's Hill on the night of which we are writing.

Now, be it observed that the Buttoner was expressly employed and also bribed by Bencull and the Hangman to watch Nell Gibson's conduct. This circumstance was alone sufficient to render him far more susceptible of misgiving than he otherwise would have been, and more liable to entertain suspicion at the slightest appearance of anything mysterious or sinister. Thus, when he suddenly recollected how Nell Gibson had started, and how strange she had looked for a moment, when he mentioned the baronet's name to her, he was struck by the idea that she had played the traitress.

Instead, therefore, of rushing out in pursuit of the fugitive, the Buttoner turned back from the threshold of the hut, and faced Nell Gibson just as she reached the bottom of the stairs down which she had followed him.

"You see this swell cove has escaped," he said, fixing his eyes upon her with a keenness that appeared to penetrate her through and through.

"I see it indeed," she answered, encountering his gaze with an unwavering steadiness, although upon her cheek there seemed to be a slight, slight changing of colour, and on the lips the least, least twitching of nervousness.

"What did you say to him just now, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner, scarcely knowing what to think, but, at all events, too uncertain as to her manner to feel justified in accusing her pointblank on the spot.

"I merely asked him whether he was sure that the money would be paid to-morrow morning," replied Nell, perceiving that she was suspected, but still maintaining an air of perfect self-possession; "and when he had assured me that there would be no mistake on that head," she continued, "I asked him whether he chose to lie down to rest or to partake of any refreshment."

"And that was all that took place?" said the Buttoner, still keeping his eyes steadily fixed upon her.

"That was all," she answered, the colour neither coming nor going now upon her cheeks, nor her lip betraying even the slightest uneasiness. "But whatever mischief may follow from this escape," she observed, in a tone of vexation mingled with reproach, "you and the others have only got yourselves to thank for it. You should have made the door fast, and not left the bird an opportunity to fly out of his cage."

"By jingo! what you say is true enough, Nell," exclaimed the Buttoner, feeling how justly merited was the remonstrance; then, advancing to the door, which still stood wide open, he listened with suspended breath, while with straining eyes he endeavoured to penetrate the pitchy blackness of the night.

"Well, can you hear anything?" asked the young woman, as he turned back again from the door, leaving it, however, wide open.

"Nothing, not even the rustling of the branches," he

replied, with a terrible imprecation. "Do you know, Nell, this is a very serious business and may end cursed badly? Like infernal fools that we were, we once or twice let slip each other's names; and so, what with knowing these, and being able to describe our precious faces, this swell cove, if he makes good his escape, will be able to give such information against us as shall make London too hot to hold us. Then, my eyes! won't Larry indeed have something to be down upon us for!"

"How provoking," ejaculated Nell Gibson; "and just at the time, too, that I was getting Larry Sampson into such a nice state of credulity that a few days more would entice him into the trap as safe and sure as possible!"

"Yes, it is deucedly provoking," growled the Buttoner, and once more he went to the threshold and listened attentively. "There's not a sound, not even the waving of the trees," and again turning away from the door, he tossed off a bumper of brandy.

"What must we do?" inquired Nell, appearing to be very uneasy, although in her heart she knew full well that the baronet would not be guilty of such black ingratitude as to give any information to the authorities calculated to compromise herself.

"What must we do?" echoed her paramour. "Why, if our pals come back without the swell cove, we must get away from here as quick as ever we can. Who knows but what he may cut across to Greenwich and come back at once with a whole posse of constables? Or perhaps he may meet some travellers on the road — "

"Ay, truly," cried Nell, affecting to be very seriously alarmed. "Let us go away at once. There's no use in staying here to be taken. Bencull and the others will know very well how to shift for themselves. Suppose we go down to the Jolly Wagoner, where Daniel Coffin and his party are."

"Well, go up-stairs and put on your toggery," interrupted the Buttoner, really beginning to think that it was high time to make themselves scarce.

Nell Gibson accordingly tripped up to the room above; but scarcely had she adjusted her bonnet and thrown her flaunting scarf over her previously much exposed shoulders and bosom, when she heard the sound of voices below, and

recognizing Bencull's hoarse tones, she hastened downstairs again, sick at heart with the apprehension that Sir Douglas had been retaken.

Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker had indeed returned, as Nell had just expected; but instead of being accompanied by the baronet, the first-mentioned of the three ruffians bore in his arms the inanimate form of a beautiful girl, while one of the others carried in his hand a bundle tied up in a shawl.

"What in the devil's name does this mean?" demanded the Buttoner, surveying his comrades with surprise and the senseless damsel with a look of admiration.

"Here's a present for Nell," said Bencull, with a salacious leer, as he looked down upon the still and placid countenance of his fair burden. "Nell will break her in, in the usual style."

"Ay, that will I!" exclaimed the young woman, who was not only immensely relieved at finding her fears unfounded with regard to the recapture of the baronet, but who was also much struck with the sweet, touching, and interesting beauty of the fair stranger, whose charms she already resolved upon turning into gold. "Mrs. Gale will give twenty guineas for this young creature; and I dare say the Marquis of Leveson, who is Mrs. Gale's best patron, will give her at least five times as much. But come, bring her upstairs and lay her down on the bed; for this swoon is so deep that it may be dangerous."

Bencull accordingly bore the beauteous girl in his arms to the chamber above; while Nell Gibson followed with the bundle which she took from the Mushroom Faker, who was carrying it. The fair stranger was deposited softly and gently upon the heap of flock; and Nell Gibson, stooping down, unfastened her bonnet, which was much crushed, so as to give her air. A luxuriant profusion of soft and fine flaxen tresses now flowed over the wretched coverlid whereon reclined the damsel's beauteous head; and though all tint of vital colouring had fled from her countenance, leaving it marble pale, and her eyes were closed as if in death, so still were the long brown lashes that rested on her cheeks, yet was there an air of such Madonna-like sweetness and angelic beauty about this lovely girl, that only a heart so intensely selfish as that of Nell Gibson, or so brutally fero-

cious as that of Bencull, could have remained inaccessible to the soft stealing influence and silent magic of such charms.

The damsel was tall, slender, and of sylphid symmetry. Her apparel, though exceedingly plain, was very neat; and as she lay stretched upon that sordid couch, her drapery, humble as it was, seemed to have settled itself in purely classic folds, developing the flowing outlines of the form which it concealed, and displaying the exquisite shape of the beautifully modelled limbs.

It was not, however, in such an æsthetic light that Nell Gibson contemplated the sweetly reposing form of the inanimate maiden, but she did not fail to appreciate all the touching softness and all the tender interest that enveloped the fair stranger as with a halo; so that when she had removed the bonnet and beheld all that silken richness of the flaxen hair, setting off a countenance of virginal innocence, shoulders beautifully rounded and gently sloping, and a bust whose nascent charms were proportioned like a Grecian statue, the young woman threw upon Bencull a look of delight, as she whispered, "This is indeed a prize that you have brought here!"

"Well, you may thank the night-coach for upsetting just at the brow of Shooter's Hill," returned Bencull.

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Nell Gibson, surveying him with a look of astonishment at such a singular remark.

"I mean just this," answered the man: "that as me and the two pals reached the hill in search of that feller Huntingdon, we heard a noise of voices calling out, horses plunging, and all kind of confusion, while lights was dancing about on the spot that the noise came from. So we crept up to the place, and we soon found out what it was. The night-coach for Dover had upset; and there was a rare scene, if so be all that took place in the dark can be called a scene at all. But it wasn't quite in the dark, neither; for the coachman and guard had got down the lamps and was moving about to see the extent of the mischief done. 'Here's this sweet young gal,' says the guard, 'which sat next to me just now; she's pitched right on this bank, and is either stunned or dead.' And as he spoke he threw the light on her face and figure in such a manner that me and the two pals caught a full view of her, for she was laying within a

couple of yards of the spot where we was hid in the shade. We saw quite enough of her to convince us that she was a sweet pretty creature; and the Mushroom Faker whispered in my ear, 'My eyes! if Nell Gibson only had that young gal in her hands for a week or so.' These words was a hint, and without any more ado I took the young gal up in my arms the moment the guard turned away to attend to a inside passenger. Finding that her heart beat, I carried her right clean away from the spot, no one seeing the dodge in the darkness and the confusion. The Mushroom Faker kicked against a bundle which he accordingly picked up and brought with him; and as it was quite close to the place where the young girl was laying, I suppose it is hers."

"Well, the occurrence is a fortunate one," observed Nell Gibson; "for Mrs. Gale will pay handsomely for this young creature. She's delicate-looking, but beautiful as an angel, though I say it who know so little about angels — and perhaps never shall know any more. But what about the baronet?" she demanded, abruptly.

"Oh, he's a baronet, is he?" exclaimed Bencull. "Yes, to be sure, I recollect there is a baronet of the name of Huntingdon at the West End — I've heard of him afore; he's a pal of the prince's. Well, I suppose he has got clean off; and precious awkward it is, too. I must go down-stairs and see what our pals say about it. So I'll leave you to take care of this young gal."

With these words the ruffian quitted the chamber; and when the door had closed behind him, Nell Gibson took some water and sprinkled it upon the young damsel's countenance. The effect was soon visible, and slowly did the fair being begin to recover; her bosom rose and fell with the long and painful undulations of returning consciousness, and opening a pair of the finest azure eyes that ever reflected the pure soul's light of innocence, she gazed up with a look of vacant inquiry into the countenance that was bending over her. Then, as her recollection gradually revived, and all the circumstances of the recent accident were recalled to her mind, she glanced around with an expression rather of gratitude than astonishment; for it naturally occurred to her that she was experiencing the hospitality of some humble dwelling near the scene of the coach accident.

"Are you injured? Do you feel hurt?" inquired Nell

Gibson, in a tone so kind and reassuring that it precluded the springing up of any immediate alarm or suspicion in the maiden's mind.

"No, I do not feel that I have sustained any serious injury, beyond a severe shock," answered the beauteous stranger, in a voice of the most touching melody; and as the colour came back with the delicate tinge of the rose-leaf to her cheeks, but with the deepest hue of that blushing flower to her exquisitely chiselled lips, and as these lips revealed teeth white as Oriental pearls, and exhaled the balmiest breath, Nell Gibson could not help thinking that she had never seen a lovelier creature than this fair girl.

"You are welcome where you are, young lady," said Nell; "and if you can put up with such poor accommodation as I am able to afford, I shall be truly happy."

"My best thanks are due for your kindness," answered the damsel; and it was with a sort of ill-subdued shudder that she cast her eyes around that wretched, cheerless, poverty-stricken chamber. "But I must pursue my journey this night; I must return to the coach, which will no doubt continue its way — "

"The coach is so much injured," interrupted Nell, "that it will not be able to go on till the morning; and therefore you must make up your mind to stay here. Is that your bundle, miss?"

"Yes, I thank you," was the answer, as the fair stranger glanced toward the object thus indicated. "But indeed — oh, indeed," she cried, in accents that bespoke a painful and increasing agitation, "I must even pursue my way on foot, for I have promised to be at Dover by a certain hour to-morrow," and as she thus spoke, she endeavoured to rise from the flock bed; but sinking back again with the weakness and exhaustion consequent upon her fall from the coach-top, she clasped her hands in a despairing manner, murmuring, "O God! what will he think?"

Then a faintness came over her, and she sank down again upon the wretched couch, deprived of consciousness.

Meantime, in the apartment down-stairs, Bob the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker had explained to the Buttoner the accident relative to the night-coach, and the manner in which the fair damsel had fallen into their hands.

"Well, I've no doubt but what my young woman will turn her to precious good advantage," said the Buttoner. "But wouldn't it have been much better to go on looking after the swell cove than to bother oneself about young gals pitched from the top of stage-coaches?"

"This Huntingdon chap, you see, has slipped betwixt our fingers," said the Mushroom Faker; "and to think of looking any longer for him in the midst of this dark night was about as wise as to hunt for a needle in a haystack."

"Then we must all bolt off at once," said the Buttoner, "or else the swell cove will p'r'aps come back with a posse of beaks at his heels."

"Now, then, who's giving way to idle fears like that there, and where the deuce is the swell cove to get assistance or raise an alarm at this time of night?" demanded Bencull, who had just descended from the chamber above. "The circumstance of his knowing our precious names and having seen all our beautiful faces is the worst; 'cos why, it will make London too hot to hold us. Now, then, I tell you what we will do," he continued, speaking with great rapidity. "There's no doubt this baronet — "

"Baronet!" ejaculated the Buttoner. "How d'ye know he's a baronet?"

"Why, your young woman says so," answered Bencull.

"Ah! Nell said so, did she?" observed the Buttoner, all his suspicions flaming up again, more vividly than ever, in his mind; but not deeming the present time a favourable opportunity to mention his misgivings, he said, "Well, go on, Bencull; what are we to do? What do you advise?"

"Why, I should think," continued the landlord of the dark crib at Jacob's Island, "that the baronet must have got down into the main road by this time; so either he is making for Dartford or else for Greenwich. Whichever it is, he must be overtook and done for, come what will. Now, then, you and me, Buttoner, will cut right through the thicket and take the Dartford direction, while you two," he added, addressing himself to the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, "set off toward Greenwich. This is what we ought to have done at first; but it's better late than never, and we're pretty sure to overtake him."

"I'll just run up and let Nell know what we are doing," said the Buttoner.

" Don't stay a moment, then," observed Bencull.

The Buttoner hastened up-stairs and found Nell Gibson hanging over the fair stranger, just at the moment that the latter had sunk down again into a state of insensibility as already described.

" I'm going off in pursuit of that swell cove, Nell," said the Buttoner, in a hurried manner and without suffering her to perceive that his suspicions were aroused again; " for Bencull says it must be done, and so we mean to dog him until we find him. You must stay here till we come back."

Nell Gibson dared not venture a word of remonstrance against this renewal of the pursuit after Sir Douglas Huntingdon; and, on the other hand, she experienced in reality no fears for her own safety in remaining at the hut, inasmuch as we have already said she was well convinced that the baronet would adopt no extreme course calculated to compromise herself.

The Buttoner, having made her acquainted with the intended expedition, paused not to speak another word, but hastened down to rejoin his companions. They then all four issued from the hut, leaving Nell Gibson alone with the fair stranger.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE JOLLY WAGONER — FRESH PERILS

We must now return to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was destined this night to pass through so many strange and perilous adventures. At the moment he bounded forth from the hut in the manner already described, he knew full well that pursuit would be instantaneous. Accordingly, instead of rushing away straight ahead and plunging into the thicket in the direction of the road, he at once passed around to the back of the cottage and there posted himself, remaining as still and motionless as a statue. At the same time he heard his pursuers rushing forth from the door on the other side of the building; and as they at once made for the road, the baronet had reason to congratulate himself on the success of his manœuvre. Not for an instant did the ruffians suspect that he had remained so near; and not only were they thus thrown completely off the right scent, but they could hear nothing, not a footfall amongst the dried leaves, nor the snapping of a twig, to mark the course which the fugitive baronet might have taken.

Having suffered several minutes to elapse, Sir Douglas Huntingdon stole away from the vicinity of the cottage; and securing about his person the knife which he had brought with him, he proceeded at random through the intense blackness of the night. The reader will therefore understand that Sir Douglas was now advancing in the very opposite direction from that which his pursuers had taken; and while they had become engaged in the adventure of the overturned coach, as already stated, the object of their search was speeding across the fields toward a light that glimmered in the distance.

Cheered by the appearance of this ray, which he hoped

would prove the beacon of hospitality as well as the harbinger of safety for the rest of the night, Sir Douglas increased his pace; but still he was compelled to advance with considerable caution, lest in the deep darkness which enveloped him he should fall into some pit, pond, or ditch. In about ten minutes he reached a stile, over which he clambered; and he now found himself in what appeared to be a narrow lane, on the other side of which, exactly facing the stile, stood a small building from one of whose lower windows glimmered the light that had guided him thither. He advanced up to the door; and now through the darkness of the night he beheld an object hanging, darker than the darkness, over his head. For the moment an indescribable feeling of alarm thrilled coldly through his frame, for it struck him that it was a human corpse thus suspended overhead. But the next instant he perceived by its shape, and also by the creaking sound it sent forth, that it was nothing more nor less than the projecting sign of an inn, or, rather, ale-house.

Encouraged by this discovery in proportion as he had just previously been terrified, the baronet felt assured of obtaining an asylum for the rest of the night; and on knocking at the door it was almost immediately opened by a stout, red-faced man, with rubicund nose and a drunken leer, both alike indicating a love of strong liquor. There could consequently be no mistake that this was the landlord, and Sir Douglas at once requested accommodation for the night.

"Well, I don't exactly know how that can be," answered the Boniface, keeping the door only half-open, with his own burly form filling up the interval, while the light from within streamed with a sort of Rembrandt effect upon the baronet, whose personal appearance was thus plainly visible to the landlord.

"How do you mean you do not know whether you can accommodate me?" cried Sir Douglas. "Is not this a house of public entertainment?"

"To be sure it is. The Jolly Wagoner is well knowed in these here parts; but there's been a steeplechase in the neighbourhood to-day, and so, you see, I have got as much company as I can well accommodate."

"But is there another inn or tavern near?" asked the baronet, in a tone of deep vexation.

"No, that there isn't," returned the landlord, still keeping

fast in the doorway. "But where do you come from, and how is it you are out so late? You seem a stylish kind of gentleman, notwithstanding."

"The truth is," answered Sir Douglas, "I am a man of rank and fortune. My carriage has been robbed by a set of ruffians on Shooter's Hill, and I was dragged away to a hut close by. There I should have been murdered were it not for secret intimation given me by a young woman of her companions' diabolical intentions. Thanks to her, my life is saved. I escaped, and, wandering through the darkness, caught a glimpse of the light shining from your window. Now, then, will you refuse me admission? — for depend upon it, the accommodation which I seek will be liberally recompensed. If you wish to know who I am, my name is Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

We must pause for an instant to acquaint our readers that every syllable of this explanation was overheard by the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling, who had established their quarters at the Jolly Wagoner for the night. They had not as yet retired to rest, but had been carousing with the landlord until the moment the baronet knocked at the front door. As he gave the above account of his adventures, the Hangman and his companions at once comprehended that it must have been Bencull's party who had waylaid the carriage, and they likewise understood that it was to the Mushroom Faker's hut the baronet had been dragged. But no words can depict their astonishment when they further gleaned from his explanations that it could have been none other than Nell Gibson who had given him the private information which induced him to escape. The Hangman and Sally Melmoth accordingly exchanged looks of ominous significancy as they both muttered the name of Nell Gibson, and Jack the Foundling seemed equally amazed and indignant at the evident treachery of that young woman.

Now the landlord of the Jolly Wagoner was neither more nor less than one of the members of Daniel Coffin's extensive brotherhood of desperadoes; and therefore, as the baronet revealed the details of his adventures, the fellow at once understood how he ought to act. But if he experienced any indecision on the point, it speedily vanished as the Hangman's voice reached his ears, in a gruff whisper from the

fireplace where he was seated, saying, " Let him in, by all means."

The landlord coughed aloud in order to prevent that whisper reaching the baronet; and assuming an air of profound civility, he said, " Pray walk in, sir. I am sorry that a gentleman of your rank and consideration should have been so scurvily treated in this here neighbourhood."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly entered the place; and as there was no passage of any kind, he at once found himself in what may be called the parlour or tap-room of that little ale-house. There were numerous Windsor chairs ranged around the walls, a huge deal table in the middle of the room, several spittoons upon the sanded floor, and a cheerful fire blazing in the grate. On the table were jugs of ale, a tray of pipes, and a paper of tobacco; and seated around the hearth were the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

Daniel Coffin was the first to make way for the baronet, and so very polite and civil was he that Sir Douglas failed to receive any evil impression from his particularly sinister countenance. The landlord, remarking " that it was very cold, and that his guest would no doubt like something warm," hastened into a little bar parlour opening from the end of the room, and speedily returned with a reeking tumbler of brandy and water.

" And so, sir, you was unfortunate enough to get robbed, was you? " said the landlord, as he resumed his own seat in the chimney-corner. " Only think," he continued, addressing himself to the Hangman, " of the gentleman being compelled to fly for his life. But what a good young woman it must have been that gave him such a hint."

" Yes," observed Daniel Coffin, " I heard the gentleman telling you the story at the door a minute ago, and I thought to myself what a lucky thing it was he got off so nice. But I really tremble for the poor young woman, in case she should be suspected by her companions."

" Ah! you may well say that," exclaimed the landlord, taking his cue from the Hangman's words. " The rascals that infest this here neighbourhood are the most murderous, villainous cutthroats that ever was; and if they only once as much as suspected the young woman — "

" Oh, don't talk of it! " cried Sally Melmoth, pretending

to be fearfully shocked. " The bare idea is enough to make one's blood run cold."

" Yes, it would indeed be very shocking," said the landlord, shaking his head with awful solemnity, " if the whole neighbourhood was frightened to-morrow morning by hearing that the poor creature was murdered in that terrible lonely hut."

" Good heavens! " cried Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had listened with increasing horror and dismay to this colloquy, so that his hair literally stood on end, " is it possible that such a frightful atrocity — "

" Possible indeed! " ejaculated the Hangman, " ay, and very probable too. You see, sir, I am a farmer, living in these parts, and I have heard too much already of the dreadful character of the villains that infest Shooter's Hill."

" Villains indeed, Lord have mercy upon us! " said the landlord, looking as grave and solemn as his semi-intoxicated condition would permit.

" Poor thing, poor thing! " observed Sally Melmoth, clasping her hands in apparent dismay at the picture which her imagination was conjuring up. Then fixing her eyes with fearful meaning upon the baronet, she said, " Ah! sir, it would be a dreadful thing indeed if the poor young woman who has just saved your life should lose her own on that very account! "

" By heavens, you have filled me with excruciating terrors! " exclaimed Sir Douglas, starting from his seat. " I did not think the young woman would run such a dreadful risk, or else not for worlds would I have abandoned her in a cowardly manner. But I see that you are right, they are indeed murderous miscreants, and if they should suspect the poor creature — "

" I can't sit here quiet," interrupted the Hangman, also springing from his seat, " while perhaps murder is being done. No, I can't do it," he cried, with an air and tone of blunt honesty. " I'll go, even if I go alone, and prevent bloodshed there."

" No, brave man, you shall not go alone," exclaimed the baronet, seizing Daniel Coffin's hand and pressing it with an effusion of the warmest admiration and gratitude. " We will go together, we will save that young woman if she be

in danger; and, at any rate, we will take her away from her vile companions. See, I am armed with a knife," he added, unbuttoning his coat, and displaying the weapon which he had brought away with him from the hut.

"And I've fortunately got my barkers with me," said the Hangman, producing a pair of pistols. "But come, let us be off. Jack," he added, turning to the Foundling, "of course you will come with us. The more we are, the stronger we shall be."

"Oh, you shall not leave me behind," exclaimed Sally Melmoth. "I shall go with you. I long to be able to say a kind word to a woman who, though the companion of murderers, has dared to save a fellow creature's life at the hazard of her own."

"Well, you are a brave woman, wife," said the Hangman, pretending to tap her affectionately on the countenance, "and so you shall come. Now, then, let us all be off."

The whole of this colloquy — indeed, the entire scene, from the instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon crossed the threshold of the Jolly Wagoner until he issued forth again — scarcely occupied ten minutes. The theme of the discourse was full of excitement for the baronet, and he found himself hurried away by a torrent of terrible misgivings relative to Nell Gibson on the one hand, and a chivalrous anxiety to redeem his character from any imputation of cowardice on the other. His feelings, therefore, being kept in a whirl the whole time, he neither had calmness enough to perceive that there was anything sinister in the looks of his new acquaintances, nor leisure to reflect upon the honesty of their motives. But yielding to the impulse which they had so artfully given to his feelings, he unhesitatingly sallied forth in company with the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

They all proceeded across the fields, the Hangman acting as the guide; and it was quite evident that, despite the Egyptian darkness which prevailed, he was well acquainted with the path. But then, Sir Douglas Huntingdon remembered that the man had represented himself as a farmer belonging to the district, and it was therefore natural enough that he should be thus familiar with every inch of the locality. They advanced at a pace which was so rapid as to sustain the hurry of the baronet's thoughts and the

excitement of his feelings, and thus he had neither leisure nor scope for those reflections which would perhaps have engendered suspicions in his mind relative to the integrity of his present companions.

"There's the hut!" said the Hangman, as they presently beheld a light glimmering ahead.

"Had we better not approach with considerable caution?" inquired the baronet.

"Yes, let us creep as quiet as we can up to the place," returned Coffin.

They accordingly advanced stealthily; and as they drew nearer they observed that lights were burning in the room above as well as in the apartment below. On reaching the hut, they peeped through one of the windows on the ground floor; the candles were flaring with long wicks on the tables, but no one was in the apartment.

"I suppose the ruffians are all out looking for me," said the baronet, in a low whisper.

"Most likely," responded the Hangman. "Let us enter the cottage."

He accordingly opened the door and passed in, followed by the baronet, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

But scarcely had the party thus entered the hut when the Hangman sprang at Sir Douglas Huntingdon like a tiger darting at its prey, and dashed him on the floor with such violence that he was stunned by the ruffianly outrage. The Hangman then tore open the baronet's coat, and taking away the knife which Sir Douglas had concealed about his person, the ruffian flung it to a distance. His next proceeding was to draw forth a piece of rope from one of his own capacious pockets, in order to bind the baronet hand and foot.

"I'll go up-stairs and see who's there," said Sally Melmoth, while her paramour was thus employed. "Perhaps that traitress Nell Gibson is up above, as a light is burning there," she added.

"You had better take care," observed the Hangman. "If she suspects that she's found out she may do you a mischief; for she's not a woman to give in easy, I can tell you."

"Ah! then I had better prepare for a battle," exclaimed Sally; and, flinging off her bonnet and cloak, she seized

the knife in one hand and a candle in the other, her whole appearance suddenly denoting the natural ferocity of her disposition when her choler was once excited. "Now if that she-devil, who I always hated and also suspected, should attempt any of her nonsense, I'll plunge this deep down into her heart," and she brandished the knife menacingly, her countenance, which was by no means bad-looking, being now distorted with the workings of diabolical passions.

"Go with her, Jack," said Daniel Coffin, who was still employed in binding the baronet's limbs. "I must make this fellow fast, so that he may give no trouble when he comes to himself. But I say, Sal, — and you too, Jack, — mind, no murder up above there. If you find Nell Gibson, which I don't suppose you will, as the place is so quiet, but if you do, I say, make her your prisoner; because we will wait till all the other fellows come back before dealing with either her or this baronet here."

But before he had even finished speaking Sally Melmoth had ascended the stairs, closely followed by Jack the Foundling. On reaching the top they pushed open the great clumsy door, and bursting in, they were struck with amazement on beholding a young creature of about seventeen, and of exquisite beauty, sleeping tranquilly upon the wretched couch spread on the floor.

We should now observe that when the fair stranger had relapsed into a state of unconsciousness, in the manner already described, Nell Gibson had done her best to restore her to life. She soon succeeded, but so weak and exhausted was the lovely damsel in consequence of the fall she had sustained from the coach-top that she only awoke from a state of insensibility to fall into one of profound slumber. Finding that she thus slept calmly, Nell Gibson had returned to her seat at the table,where she regaled herself with another glass of brandy. The effects of the liquor which she had imbibed so copiously soon exhibited themselves in a deep drowsiness, and she fell fast asleep in a sort of nook, or recess, where the table stood. So sound was her slumber that she had not heard the arrival of the Hangman's party, nor even the noise of the outrage upon the baronet in the room below; but when the door of the upper chamber was burst open by Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling, Nell Gibson awoke from her nap.

In the dulness and drowsiness which hung about her after so insufficient an amount of sleep, and with the fumes of liquor still obscuring her brain, she did not immediately observe who the persons were thus entering the chamber. But in a few moments her sight grew clearer, her ideas more collected, and, rising from her seat, she beheld Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling.

"Ah! what, are you here?" she exclaimed, addressing herself familiarly to the Hangman's mistress; but instantaneously perceiving that this woman carried a knife in her hand, and that her countenance was positively hideous with the distortions and workings of dire passion, Nell Gibson saw that something was wrong. With admirable presence of mind, however, she said, "What is the matter?"

"Who is that girl?" demanded Sally, glancing down toward the fair stranger.

"What do you mean by coming up here to me with that knife in your hand and with these ferocious looks?" asked Nell Gibson, her own spirit rising and her eyes flashing fire upon the Hangman's mistress.

But before any further words were exchanged between the two women, the Hangman himself, having finished binding the baronet's limbs, made his appearance in the chamber, and was as much struck as Sally Melmoth and the Foundling had been on observing the sweet girl, who, startled by the sound of angry voices, was now opening her eyes in alarm.

"Here is the traitress!" exclaimed Sally Melmoth, pointing savagely with the knife toward Nell Gibson.

"Traitress! who do you dare call a traitress?" cried the young woman, fortified, or, rather, rendered desperate, by the brandy she had imbibed so plentifully.

"Ah! we have got your baronet, Miss Nelly; we have brought him back with us, I can tell you," exclaimed the Hangman's mistress, in a jeering and taunting tone.

A livid paleness overspread Nell Gibson's countenance as she saw that her proceeding of that night with regard to Sir Douglas Huntingdon was thus positively known; and bold though she naturally was, armed, too, as she now likewise was with an artificial stimulant, she nevertheless felt her heart sink down completely within her, for she knew

full well that hers was a treachery which her companions in crime seldom forgave, and the punishment of which was death!

"Ah! you see that she is guilty — her looks betray her!" yelled forth the infuriate Sally Melmoth; and raising her knife, she sprang like a tiger-cat toward Nell Gibson, who, cruelly alarmed, fled screaming horribly into the nook where the table stood.

"Do not murder her, Sal!" cried the Hangman, in a voice of thunder, as he seized upon his enraged mistress and threw his arms around her to hold her back, while Jack the Foundling proceeded to wrest the knife from her grasp.

But here we must observe that although only just awakened from a profound slumber, the fair stranger was nevertheless startled into the fullest consciousness by the fearful scene that thus suddenly burst upon her vision. Instantaneously comprehending that instead of being beneath some hospitable roof, she was in a den of murderous miscreants, the affrighted girl sprang up from the bed and rushed to the door. Terror, the keenest, acutest, most poignant terror, gave her wings that made her movements rapid as the lightning flash; and all her senses being suddenly endowed with the most vivid clearness, in this moment of life or death, it was no wonder if she observed that on the outer side of the chamber door there was a large bolt. With admirable presence of mind she dashed the door to, and with her taper fingers shot the bolt into its socket; then precipitating herself down the stairs, not knowing what obstacles she might have to encounter, she alighted in the chamber below.

At first it struck her as being empty; but an ejaculation of mingled surprise and entreaty reached her ears, and then her eyes fell upon the baronet, who had just returned to consciousness. Without wasting a single moment in words, the courageous girl proceeded to action; and observing that a cupboard stood open, she threw a rapid glance upon its shelves. A knife was what she sought for, and a knife did she find accordingly. In another instant she was upon her knees, cutting the cords which bound the baronet's limbs.

It was a moment of awful suspense and excruciating

alarm for both. The Hangman was thundering at the door above, evidently dashing himself with all the weight of his form against it, while the process of cutting the cords was calculated to occupy nearly a minute. A minute! Ah! it is nothing in the ordinary events of life, but it is an age, an entire age, when life itself is trembling in the balance or hanging to a thread.

But now the last piece of cord is cut, the bonds fall off the baronet's limbs, and starting to his feet, he grasps the hand of his fair deliverer with an effusion of gratitude that is in itself a love, a worship, a devotion.

"Away, dear girl, away!" he cried, retaining that fair hand in his own, that he might guide her from the hut.

At the same instant the door of the chamber was burst open; but with such fury did the Hangman precipitate himself down the stairs, that, missing the steps, he fell heavily from top to bottom. To this circumstance, perhaps, did the baronet and his fair companion owe their safety; for as they darted forth from the hut, plunging into the utter darkness of the night, they had the advantage of the few moments which were lost by Daniel Coffin in picking himself up and trying his limbs to feel if any were broken. Then forth he sped in pursuit of the fugitives, Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling remaining behind him to keep guard over Nell Gibson.

Sir Douglas proceeded at random as he guided his fair companion, thinking less of taking any special direction than of placing as great a distance as possible between themselves and the hut. Speedily emerging from the thicket, he paused for an instant to listen whether there were any sounds of pursuit; but he could hear nothing save the heart-beatings of that young girl who now clung with apparent exhaustion to his arm.

"We are not pursued," he said, in a hurried whisper. "Do you think you can walk a little way farther, — only a little way? And then perhaps we shall reach some place of safety."

"Yes, oh, yes," she murmured, in a tone that nevertheless was fraught with the accents of desperation. "I feel that I am sinking, and yet I must proceed; our lives depend upon it."

"Oh, for God's sake, make an effort, make an effort!"

whispered the baronet, in a tone of intense earnestness; and scarcely caring for himself at the moment, he felt as much, yes, as profoundly, for this sweet girl as if she were a beloved sister or one whom he had long loved and who was to become his wife.

They advanced again, his arm thrown around her slender waist to support her; and in this manner they proceeded for about ten minutes. Their eyes, growing accustomed to the deep darkness, enabled them to distinguish the obscure outlines of the path which they were pursuing; and to the joy of the baronet he found that they were rapidly nearing the main road. But his fair companion now grew so faint that she clung to him like a dead weight, and he had to carry rather than support her. That sudden flaming up of her courage, her spirit, and her presence of mind in the hut had led to a reaction which was gradually prostrating her completely; and by the time they emerged from the fields into the highroad the baronet was made painfully aware that she was fainting in his arms.

At this moment the sounds of rapidly approaching wheels were head, and coming, too, in the same direction which they were pursuing. In a few moments the lights of a vehicle appeared, and on the baronet hailing it, to his joy it proved to be a return post-chaise journeying empty to London.

We need hardly say that he took immediate possession of it, carefully placing his fair companion upon the cushions inside; and on reaching London, she was consigned in a state of alarming exhaustion to the care of the baronet's housekeeper, Mrs. Baines.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE INTERESTING INVALID

After a profound slumber of some hours' duration, the fair stranger awoke to find herself lying on a comfortable couch, in a handsomely furnished chamber, and with a motherly-looking person standing by the bedside. The heavy curtains were drawn over the windows, and the room was darkened, evidently for the purpose of preventing the invalid's slumber being disturbed by a glare of light; but through an opening in the drapery stole a golden beam of the sun, and thus the damsel knew that it was broad daylight without.

Then, as a crowd of memories rushed into her brain, a strong shuddering shook her; and it seemed as if some source of ineffable anguish were rending her very heart-strings.

"My poor girl, what ails you? What do you feel?" asked Mrs. Baines, bending over her and speaking in a tone accompanied with a look of such true maternal kindness that the tears gushed out from the maiden's eyes, as if all the founts of her tenderest and deepest feelings were opened. "You have something that troubles you very much, my dear child, something that afflicts you sorely," continued the housekeeper. "I do not ask you to reveal to me your secrets; but remember that you saved the life of my master, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and therefore, through a feeling of gratitude, if for no other motive, am I anxious and ready to do anything to serve you."

The fair girl gazed up with a look of unspeakable feeling at Mrs. Baines, and then her lips moved as if a revelation were wavering upon them; but whether it were so or not the good woman could not precisely tell. At all events,

before the invalid had time to utter a word, the door opened and Doctor Copperas entered the room.

"Ah! here is the doctor," whispered Mrs. Baines to the invalid. Then turning toward the physician, she said, "I am glad you have come, sir, for this poor dear girl here seems dreadfully exhausted."

"Well, Mrs. Baines, we shall soon put her to rights," said the physician, seating himself by the bedside and proceeding to feel the damsel's pulse. "Sir Douglas sent for me three or four hours ago — indeed, at nine o'clock this morning, I believe."

"Yes, sir," observed Mrs. Baines, "and now it is past midday."

"True, but I was at a consultation with that very remarkable and extraordinary man, Doctor Thurston. Indeed, Mrs. Baines, if it were possible to change conditions in this world, and if I had my choice, I think I would sooner be Doctor Thurston than any one I know."

"Well, sir, this is most singular," observed the housekeeper; "for I remember that about six weeks ago, when our coachman broke his leg and you were out of town at the time, Sir Douglas called in Doctor Thurston, and I recollect that the doctor whispered to me, after he had given his opinion on the case, that it was precisely one which you, sir, ought to have superintended."

"Did he, though? Well, that is very remarkable," cried Doctor Copperas, affecting to be quite amazed. Then turning to the fair stranger, he said, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon has just explained to me all the incidents of the preceding night so far as they relate to himself. Had you been long in that hut whence you both escaped so marvellously, and had you been ill-treated during your stay there?"

"I had not been there, sir, more than an hour or two," was the answer, "when the incidents occurred which led to our escape, and I certainly received no harsh nor severe treatment." Then, after a short pause, the damsel continued to observe, "I had taken my place on the outside of the night-coach for Dover, it was upset on Shooter's Hill, and I must have been stunned by the fall, for I remember nothing more until I awoke in that hut."

"Excuse the question I am about to ask," said Doctor

Copperas. "Had you previously been suffering from privations or sorrows?"

But the damsel suddenly burst into tears, and the physician, although by no means of tender disposition, was touched by this eloquent yet silent response to his query.

"Ah! poor girl — exhaustion — general debility — too great excitement — fearful reaction," muttered the doctor to himself. "Well, you will be taken care of here, and I shall come and see you again in the evening. Now, Mrs. Baines, pen, ink, and paper, if you please, and draw the curtain a little."

The housekeeper hastened to obey these instructions, and Doctor Copperas proceeded to write the prescription, observing as he did so "that he felt convinced he was about to adopt the very same treatment which that eminent and remarkable man, Doctor Thurston, would have recommended had he been called in."

Having concluded his Esculapian hieroglyphics, he turned toward the bed, saying, in a bland tone of inquiry, "And now, what is the name of my interesting patient?"

At the instant that the doctor began the first words of his question, the damsel's cheeks were colourless as alabaster; but scarcely had the final syllables fallen from his lips when all the blood in her veins seemed to rush to her countenance, suffusing it with the deepest crimson.

"Ah! my dear child," cried Mrs. Baines, "if the doctor has said anything indiscreet, do not annoy yourself. God knows you can bear no more excitement! I am sure when you were brought home here at three o'clock this morning, in such a state of exhaustion that you could not speak, and your very reason seemed to be abandoning you — But, heavens!" ejaculated the housekeeper, suddenly interrupting herself as a fresh torrent of tears now gushed out from the poor girl's eyes, "what ails you, my dear child, what ails you?"

The damsel could, however, give no response, even if she wished to do so; her voice was lost in deep and suffocating sobs. But, looking up with an expression of ineffable gratitude upon her countenance, she took Mrs. Baines's hand and pressed it to her lips.

"There, there," said Doctor Copperas, "I am afraid I

said something indiscreet; but I would not wound the poor girl's feelings for the world. As for the prescription, I have made it out in the name of Miss Smith, which, by the by, is the name that in similar circumstances is invariably adopted by that ornament of the profession, Doctor Thurston."

Doctor Copperas now took his leave, and when he was gone, Mrs. Baines addressed the invalid in the kindest and most endearing manner that she could possibly adopt; for the housekeeper was indeed an excellent-hearted and worthy woman, and though in the service of a master renowned for his dissipated habits and rakish conduct, she herself was of unimpeachable respectability.

" Now, my dear girl," she said, bending over the couch and whispering with soothing softness of tone in the invalid's ear, " you have some secret grief which is gnawing at your very heart's core. I do not ask you to tell me what it is; but I do ask you to tell me if there is anything that can be done to alleviate it. Should you choose to trust me, you would find that I would go fifty miles to serve you, but not raise a finger to injure you. I saw plain enough that you did not like to mention your name, but I am sure that if there is any harm attached thereto, it is not you yourself who have brought the stain upon it. No, there is innocence in your looks, the candour of purity upon your brow. Ah! and the manner in which you now regard me proves that I am right in believing you to be the dear good girl I hoped and wished the first instant I saw you. But even if you had done anything wrong, there is forgiveness to be obtained. Oh, now I see again, by that deprecating look so softly earnest, that it is not so. No, you are all that is good — I am certain you are. Tell me, then, dear child, what can be done for you; and recollect that my master owes you so deep a debt of gratitude there is no trouble he would shun and no expense he would spare to render you a service and lighten your heart of the load of affliction."

" My kindest, best friend," exclaimed the invalid, throwing her arms around the neck of the good housekeeper, " I will tell you everything. Yes, I will tell you all, and then you will comprehend wherefore I am unhappy, why I am tortured with a devouring suspense, and also why I hesitated to mention a name which, nevertheless, God

knows, has never been disgraced by me. But oh, before I commence my narrative, let me beg of you, let me implore you to grant me a boon."

"Speak, dear child!" exclaimed the housekeeper. "What is it?"

"Will you procure me a newspaper of to-day?" said the fair stranger, in a low, soft tone, as if she even hesitated to solicit so trifling a favour.

"In a moment," cried Mrs. Baines; and disappearing from the room for a short time, she returned with a morning journal, saying, "Sir Douglas always takes this newspaper, and therefore it was handy in the house at the moment."

But while she was thus speaking, the invalid, with a sudden access of frenzied excitement, had snatched, or, indeed, rather torn the journal from the matron's hand; and sitting up in the bed, as if that feverish excitement had nerved her with sudden strength, she ran her eye over the columns with the breathless suspense and excruciating uncertainty of one who is about to behold the clearing up of a matter of life or death.

"Thank God," she exclaimed, "he is safe!"

Then, as if this sudden acquirement of a certainty and abrupt term to a harrowing suspense were to be followed by a reaction proportionately strong and painful, she fell back in a state of utter prostration alike of mind and body. Mrs. Baines hastened to administer a cordial and apply other restoratives, but hours elapsed, and evening was drawing its veil of obscurity over the hemisphere, before the invalid had so far recovered as to be enabled to converse again. Then, with only a few brief words of preface, to the the effect that she yearned to unbosom the secrets that lay heavy upon her soul, the poor girl poured forth her revelations to the friendly ear of the matron.

Two hours later, indeed, at about nine o'clock that same evening, Mrs. Baines and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were closeted together in earnest deliberation.

"Ariadne Varian," said the baronet, repeating the words several times. "How prettily the name sounds! It is really most appropriate for such a charming creature. Do you know, Mrs. Baines, that I really feel — But no matter," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself.

"Ah! sir, I know what you were going to say," observed the housekeeper, "and really if you would not think it rude nor unbecoming on my part, I should so earnestly advise you to think of marriage."

"Well, well," said the baronet, laughing, "I suppose I must think of it some day or another. But let me read over again this paragraph relative to poor Ariadne's brother; and then you shall tell me, at full length and in detail, all those incidents that you have gleaned from her lips and which you have as yet only sketched so briefly to me."

"Please to read the passage aloud, sir," said Mrs. Baines, "for I only glanced hurriedly over it just now."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly took up the newspaper and read aloud the ensuing passage:

"It will be in the recollection of our readers that at the last sessions of the Old Bailey a respectable-looking and genteel young man, named Theodore Varian, was sentenced to transportation for seven years for embezzling moneys and falsifying accounts while in the service of Mr. Emmerson, the well-known stock-broker of Birchin Lane. On the trial, it will be borne in mind, the young man pleaded guilty, and told a somewhat pathetic tale relative to having made free with his master's money to pay debts contracted during a beloved sister's illness. Up to this point the sympathy of the whole court had been evidently in his favour; but it will be remembered that he proceeded to accuse Mr. Emmerson of having held out threats and made infamous proposals relative to his sister. As a matter of course, Mr. Emmerson indignantly denied the imputation; and the learned recorder, to whom Mr. Emmerson's high character in the City is of course well known, told the prisoner very plainly that all previous sympathy excited in his behalf was not merely destroyed, but was succeeded by loathing and contempt for this base endeavour to calumniate his employer. Hence the severe sentence of seven years' transportation which his lordship deemed it right to pass upon the prisoner.

"We have recapitulated these facts which were before published in our columns in order to remind our readers of the artful cunning and unprincipled disposition of this young man, whose external appearance and genteel manners at first enlisted so much sympathy in his favour. And

if any further proof were wanted of the right estimate which the learned recorder formed of his consummate duplicity, such proof will be found in the occurrence we are about to relate. In a word, this Theodore Varian escaped from Newgate last night in a very remarkable manner. It appears that during the day the order had been received for the removal of himself and other convicts to Woolwich, preparatory to their departure for the penal settlement. As the order arrived suddenly, the convicts were permitted to see their friends until a late hour last evening; and it is remembered by the gaol authorities that Theodore Varian was visited by his sister, who was clad in an ample cloak. At nine o'clock the bell rang as a signal for all visitors to depart; and as there were some fifty or sixty strangers, male and female, at the time, it is supposed that Varian must have suddenly slipped on his sister's cloak, and probably a bonnet and veil, which it would have been easy for her to conceal under that cloak. At all events, shortly after the strangers had departed, Theodore Varian was missed; and the above explanation is the only solution that can be given as to the mode of escape. Up to the hour of going to press, we have not heard of his recapture."

"And the conjecture, then, relative to the method of the escape, is the right one," said the baronet, as he laid down the newspaper. "But you must now give me all the details of Ariadne's narrative."

"With much pleasure, sir," replied Mrs. Baines. "It appears that Theodore and Ariadne are orphans, and that they entertain the sincerest affection for each other, — an affection not only natural in consequence of the ties of brother and sister, but also strengthened by the keen appreciation of that orphan lot which they have together endured from childhood. It is true that Theodore self-appropriated some of Mr. Emmerson's money; and I feel confident it is also true that the hard-hearted, griping, greedy citizen did tell the unhappy Theodore that if within three days he did not prepare his sister to surrender her honour, the worst should ensue. This was toward the close of September, and for the three following days Ariadne says that her poor brother seemed to be frenzied with grief. It was not until the third night that he revealed to his sister

the horrors of his position and the deeper infamy into which Emmerson tried to plunge them both. Ariadne was at first distracted, but in a short time the natural strength of her character enabled her to speak with calmness upon the position in which herself and unhappy brother were involved. To be brief, they saw no alternative but flight; and having hastily disposed of everything salable, and thus reduced the amount of their worldly possessions to the compass of two small bundles containing changes of raiment, they fled from the metropolis."

"Poor orphans!" said the baronet, in a low tone and with an involuntary sigh. "But go on, Mrs. Baines, go on."

"They got a lift in some vehicle as far as Hounslow, where they passed the night. In the next room to the one where Varian slept two persons of evidently queer character were lodged, and not being aware that the partition was so thin as it was, they conversed unrestrainedly. Theodore could not help hearing every word they said, and he found that they were two highwayman. They were boasting of their exploits, and from what they said it appeared that there was always a much better chance of an offender against the laws concealing himself in London than in any country districts. In fine, their discourse made such an impression upon Theodore that he resolved to retrace his way to the capital. In the morning he communicated to his sister all he had overheard, and the resolution he had formed in consequence; and accordingly, when night came again, they returned to London. Hiding themselves in a garret in some low neighbourhood, they passed a fortnight in a state of continual terrors, apprehensions, and alarms. They also lived most frugally, even miserably, in order to eke out their scanty resources. Poor orphans! how often and often must their tears have been mingled as they thought of the present and the past, but dared not look forward to the future. Oh, it makes my heart bleed to think what this dear sweet girl must have suffered. Is it not shocking, sir, that such a heavenly creature, such an angelic being, should be doomed to know such bitter affliction? Only fancy those soft azure eyes weeping such bitter tears, only fancy those lovely pale cheeks, just like damask, being scalded with floods of anguish! Ah! and

fancy, too, that those lips which look like rosebuds should ever wreathe otherwise than in the sunniest smiles."

"Mrs. Baines, you are growing quite poetical," said the baronet, who was in reality deeply affected. "Come, pray proceed," he observed, hurriedly. "You were telling me how this poor girl and her brother lived for a fortnight in that wretched garret. Pshaw!" he suddenly cried, "what the deuce is the meaning of this?" and he dashed a tear from his eye.

"Shall I give you a glass of wine, sir?" asked Mrs. Baines, perceiving that he was profoundly touched, and thinking that he required something to console him.

"No, not a drop, I thank you, I never was less in a humour to drink in my life," he exclaimed. "Pray go on."

"Well, sir, at the end of that fortnight the young man resolved to make an endeavour to find employment under another name. He accordingly went out to seek for such employment; but as several hours passed and he did not return, poor Ariadne could no longer restrain the terrors that were devouring her. She rushed forth wildly to seek for him, to make inquiries after him; and she soon learned the fatal truth. He had been arrested, taken before the lord mayor, and committed to Newgate. O God! I can enter fully and deeply into the anguish which the poor girl must have experienced as these terrible tidings burst upon her. Of course I need not say that from the day of his arrest to that of his escape she visited him as often and remained with him as long as the prison regulations would allow. The sessions were being held at the time when he was arrested, and he was tried a few days after. This was a month ago. You have seen, sir, by the newspaper, that he pleaded guilty, and that he was condemned to seven years' transportation. If he had not told the truth about Emmerson's infamous proposals, he would perhaps only have had two years' imprisonment; but because he boldly endeavoured to unmask the villain, the judge threw aside all sympathy."

"You see, Mrs. Baines, Emmerson is a man of wealth," observed the baronet, "a man of high standing in the City, a member of the common council, too, and, what is more, a staunch Tory. Besides which, he has got a splendid house

at Clapham, and no doubt the recorder frequently dines with him. So you perceive it is easy to account for the judge's behaviour on the bench in Theodore Varian's case. But now for the rest of your narrative."

"A few more words will conclude it, sir," said Mrs. Baines. "From the moment of Varian's condemnation, he and his sister never lost an opportunity of discussing the possibility of his escape. The hope of effecting this alone sustained them. Ariadne tells me that she has lain awake whole nights, pondering upon the chances for and against such a consummation. She says that for hours and hours her thoughts have never wandered away from this one subject. At length the plan was settled, and yesterday was the day for carrying it into execution. Having half-starved herself to eke out her scanty resources, the poor girl had just sufficient to enable her to pay her own coach-fare to Dover, and afford her brother a few shillings to purchase food during his journey thither. The newspaper tells you how the escape was accomplished. No sooner did Ariadne find that the project had succeeded, and that her brother, disguised in the cloak and bonnet, was safe outside the terrible doors of Newgate, than she almost went mad with the delirium of joy. But she was compelled to part immediately from Theodore, for fear of exciting suspicion and affording a trace for pursuers; and while he set off on foot on his journey to Dover, the young maiden took her place outside the night-coach. Of course their ultimate intention was to escape over to France, the captain of one of the hoys plying between Dover and Calais being well acquainted with the Varians and well disposed toward them. In conclusion, sir," added Mrs. Baines, "let me observe that when poor Ariadne entreated for a sight of the newspaper, it was to ascertain whether her brother had got safe away or had been recaptured after she parted from him."

"And you have got the exact address where she was to meet her brother at Dover?" said the baronet, inquiringly.

"I wrote it down on this slip of paper from Ariadne's own lips," responded Mrs. Baines, "and here it is."

"Well, I wonder now whether that fellow James is ready to take his departure," cried the baronet, looking at his watch. "It is nine o'clock."

But at this moment the door opened, and the valet James made his appearance, muffled up as for a journey.

"Now, James," said Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a serious tone, "I can of course rely upon you, as this matter is one not only of delicacy but also most confidentially sacred. You will travel with all possible speed to Dover, and there you will seek this address," continued the baronet, placing the slip of paper in the servant's hands. "You will ask for Theodore Varian, and when you mention the name of Ariadne as a pass-word you will obtain access to the same Theodore. You will then give him this purse, and urge him to lose no time in escaping to Calais. Tell him that his sister has found kind friends in London, and that, moreover, measures will be taken to obtain a free pardon for himself. You may add that in the course of a day or two his sister will write to him full particulars, addressed to the post-office in Calais."

The baronet placed a heavy purse in the hands of his faithful servant, who forthwith took his departure in a post-chaise for Dover; and the moment he was gone Mrs. Baines returned to Ariadne's chamber. The fair invalid was just awaking from a deep slumber in which the good housekeeper had left her ere now; and the assurance that the messenger had departed to meet her brother at Dover relieved her gentle breast of its chief anxiety. Doctor Copperas presently paid her another visit, and declared that she was going on as favourably as he could expect, adding aside to Mrs. Baines, "that he did not think she could have progressed better since midday, even if under the care of that eminent and distinguished man, Doctor Thurston."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE RAKE AND THE RAKE'S VICTIM

SCARCELY had Mrs. Baines quitted the apartment where she had been conversing with the baronet, when a domestic entered to state that a female desired to speak with him upon important business. Not knowing who she might be, and never refusing a female visit, Sir Douglas Huntingdon ordered her to be admitted. A woman, somewhat flauntingly dressed and with a dark veil over her countenance, was shown in; but the instant she crossed the threshold, and even before she raised the veil, the baronet guessed who she was. Nor was he mistaken, for, advancing toward him, she lifted her veil and disclosed the features of Nell Gibson.

" Ah! I am glad you are come, I am delighted to see you safe and sound," he exclaimed, with the most unaffected sincerity. " But, good heavens! how did you escape from those murderous wretches? I have been tortured with the cruellest alarms concerning you. At one moment I was resolved to give information at Bow Street of all that had occurred; but then I feared that if you had really escaped, after all, I should only be compromising you, and that, for many reasons, you are well aware I would not do for the world. Besides which, I felt assured that if you escaped the dangers and the violence that were imminent at the moment I left the hut, you would escape altogether."

While the baronet was giving vent to these rapidly uttered expressions, Nell Gibson seated herself near the fire and gazed upon him with a species of tender interest that seemed strange indeed with one who led such a life and possessed such a heart as she.

" And how knew you," she said, in a gentle and even tremulous voice, " that such dangers menaced me? "

"In the first place, because I discovered, when it was too late, that I had revealed to a set of miscreants the kindness you had shown toward me," answered the baronet, — "I mean that man, that woman, and that youth whom I accompanied back to the hut. Moreover, when I recovered my senses while bound hand and foot in the room below, I overheard the accusation of 'traitress' levelled against yourself, and then your piercing screams. Ah! Ellen, I can assure you that those screams have rung in my ears ever since!"

"And the young girl whom you brought away with you?" said Nell Gibson, inquiringly.

"Oh, she is safe and will be taken care of," returned the baronet. "But wherefore was she borne to the hut?"

"Do not ask me," said Nell Gibson. "For no good, you may be sure. Ah! you do not appear satisfied with what I say? Well, then, it was to make her as bad as I am."

"Enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon, with a shudder; and then he fixed his eyes upon Nell Gibson, as if to scrutinize thoroughly her entire appearance.

"Ah! you may well look at me," she cried, in a tone of bitterness. "I am no doubt changed since first you knew me. That was four years ago. I was then a merry, laughing girl of between fifteen and sixteen, — yes, and an innocent girl, too — "

"Do not think of the past, Ellen," said the baronet, scarcely able to suppress a sigh as he mentally compared the young woman as she now appeared with the young girl as she was a few years back. "You last night perilled your life to save mine. Tell me, then, what can I do for you?"

"You will give me the hundred guineas for this letter," she said, producing the one which he had written at the hut. "That is all I ask of you, and it will be the means of saving my life."

"Can you fear for a moment that I shall hesitate?" exclaimed the baronet. "I will give you the hundred guineas wherewith to appease those vile men; and I will give you another hundred guineas, ay, or even three or four hundred, for yourself."

"No, not a shilling, not a farthing," said Nell Gibson, firmly and decisively. "Since the day I left you, never, never have I sought succour at your hand; and I would

sooner perish, yes, perish miserably, than receive such succour from you."

"But wherefore, Ellen?" said the baronet, in amazement. "There is something unnatural, something perverse in this."

"No, it is natural enough, if you do but understand the mind of a woman. Since I left you I have endured many and many privations; I have known what it is to want bread, ay, I have known what it is to feel starvation. Or else do you think, if it had not been through some desperate necessity, I should ever have fallen into the company in which you found me last night? But even when perishing, as it were, with famine, I never once applied to you."

"But you were wrong, Ellen, you were wrong," said the baronet. "Whatever had occurred, my purse would always have been open to you."

"Oh, yes, I knew that; and it was the thought of your kindness that stung me to the very quick. And therefore, so far from being wrong," she exclaimed, suddenly assuming a proud look that for a moment rendered her really and truly handsome, "so far from being in the wrong," she repeated, "I was in the right; for although fallen so low and become so debased, degraded, and vile, I still had my own little feelings of pride — "

"With what wretched sophistry have you deluded yourself!" interrupted the baronet. "Was I not your seducer? Did I not inflict the most terrible wrong upon you which selfish man can possibly perpetrate toward confiding woman?"

"Ay, if we had always stood in the light of seducer and victim," said Nell Gibson, "it would have been different. Then I should have had a claim upon you, and would not have hesitated to assert it. But if you inflicted the first wrong upon me, I subsequently inflicted another upon you. I proved faithless to you when you loved me so well and cherished me so fondly. I deceived you most grossly, and there was something vile, yes, beyond all expression vile, in my conduct when I robbed and plundered you to expend the proceeds of my iniquity upon a paramour. Well, then, instead of remaining your victim I became a wrong-doer toward you, and every claim that I might have possessed upon your consideration was forfeited. Yes, I felt all this; and again I tell you that I would sooner have died, ay, have

perished miserably, than have received as the pittance of charity that which once came from a noble bounty. Rather would I have sunk down through famine, than have obtained from your pity that which I once received from your fondest love. Besides, when I left you I was clothed in silk and satin, and no earthly consideration would have induced me to reappear before you in the rags of beggary."

"But still," observed the baronet, much moved by the language which thus poured with such undoubted sincerity from the young woman's lips, "but still in the depths of your soul remained a certain fondness and affection for me; otherwise you would not have perilled your life to save mine last night."

"Listen to me," exclaimed Nell Gibson, "and I will unfold to you the maze and mysteries of a woman's heart, — not merely of one woman, nor of my heart alone, but the feeling which is peculiar to us all. In the bosom of the vilest, most degraded, and most crime-stained of the unfortunate women whom the lust of man or the iron sway of poverty has flung upon the streets, yes, in the bosom of even the foulest, lowest, and vilest prostitute, there is one small sanctuary in which an image is treasured up as the idol of a worship, and this is the image of the seducer. In retrospecting over years of crime, the unfortunate woman carries her recollections back to the period of her girlhood and her first virgin love. Even though it was the love which robbed her of that virginity and steeped her in disgrace, it is nevertheless the one bright spot in her checkered career. Yes, if we look back through a vista of rags and filth and poverty and wretchedness and crime, still do we behold at the beginning that bright and sunny period when hopes were golden and the heart gushed forth with all the freshest feelings of youth. Then is it that the image of the loved one, though perhaps no longer loved, is reproduced vividly to the memory; nor is he thought of as a mere seducer, no, nor is that past springtide of joy looked back upon as the very source whence all subsequent pollutions have flowed. Now, then, do you understand me? Since I fled from you I have received the embraces of many, many men; I have been glad to sell myself for gold or for silver; I have given myself up to suitors in moments of sensuality; at other times, almost without passion and without impulse, I have aban-

doned myself to strangers through mere profligacy. And yet, though thus drinking the cup of vice to the very dregs, and dragging myself, as it were, through all kinds of moral filth and pollution, there has still always been one image that I have cherished in the sanctuary of my heart, and which no stains of vice or shades of misery could possibly efface. That image is yours; and you are the only living being for whom I would have perilled my life last night or would peril it again. Nay, had you been any other person, I should have seen you killed without pity and without remorse."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had listened in speechless amazement to this address, which the young woman delivered with an impressive seriousness that precluded all doubt as to her sincerity. Besides which, her actions at the hut had fully proven the existence of that sentiment with regard to her seducer which she now explained; and as with rapid glance the baronet's mental vision swept over the past, he comprehended full well how such a state of feeling as that which she had described could be.

Four year had elapsed since he had first encountered Ellen Gibson upon one of his estates in a distant county. Her parents were dead; she had no relatives, but was living with friends. Her education had been tolerably well cared for; indeed, she had been reared in a manner above her means or her expectations. The baronet saw her and loved her; and she loved him in return. Marriage was not spoken of between a man of rank and wealth and a young girl of rustic parentage; but she became his mistress. He brought her to London, lodged her in a sumptuous mansion, gave her carriages, horses, servants, — in fine, all the luxuries and elegancies of life. But she soon formed other connections; and her profligacy, developing itself with remarkable suddenness, hurried her away with a sort of frenetic speed. Sir Douglas discovered her infidelity, and wrote to remonstrate, even offering her forgiveness; for he was infatuated with her at the time. But instead of answering his note, she sold off the entire contents of the mansion, the carriages, horses, even to his own plate which she had with her at the time; and taking her departure, she lavished the produce upon a paramour who had not a single quality, personal, mental, or social, that could compare with those of the baronet.

Since that period her career had been one of those rapid downward ones which furnish so many a history of female crime; and therefore seeing what she now was, and what she once had been, Sir Douglas Huntingdon could scarcely feel astonished if from the dark depths of her present position she occasionally cast wistful, longing, and even loving eyes backward upon that epoch which formed the brightest page in her life's history.

"But wherefore," he said, after a long pause, "should you go back to those dreadful men? Tell me, would you like to abandon the sort of existence you are now leading?"

"God knows I would!" returned the young woman, in a voice expressive of the deepest feeling. "But it is impossible, it is impossible," she immediately added, shaking her head, while an expression of unutterable despair swept over her countenance.

"Why impossible?" demanded the baronet, in amazement. "Can you not to-morrow, if you choose, retire into some agreeable seclusion? What if I were to go early in the morning and take a nice respectable lodging for you —"

"Oh, no, no, it is impossible," interrupted Nell Gibson, impatiently. "You are not aware, you cannot imagine how difficult it is to extricate oneself from the meshes of crime."

"Do you mean to tell me," said the baronet, contemplating the young woman in dismay, "solemnly and seriously tell me, that you are so inveterately wedded to this shocking course of life —"

"My God! no, ten thousand times no!" interrupted Nell Gibson, a sort of agony sweeping over her features. "Have I not told you that I would abandon this wretched, wretched mode of life if I could? And, oh, words have no power to tell the deep, deep horror, the intense loathing, which I at times feel for such an existence. Ere now I spoke of my depravities, and I said that often, when neither tempted by gold nor prompted by passion, I flung myself into the embraces of the merest strangers. Well, perhaps if I had described my humour on such occasions as the recklessness of despair, instead of the wantonness of sheer depravity, I should have been nearer the mark. Yes, to drive away thought I must always have some kind of excitement. I hate brandy, but I drink it often and often; I feel that it hardens me. I am always ready to do anything wrong, ay, even to

commit unnecessary or unprofitable crimes, sooner than do nothing; and for the same reason do I seek the excitement of all possible profligacies. By these means do I expel thought, and thus manage to maintain a calm and even happy exterior."

"But wherefore, I again ask," said the baronet, "should you not abandon this course of life if you wish? Wherefore return to those horrible companions?"

"Because I am so utterly and completely in their power," answered the young woman. "Wherever I might hide myself, they would seek me out. Ay, even did I fly to the ends of the earth, they would pursue me, they would discover my retreat, they would murder me. When once a person gets deep in with such companionship, it is impossible to extricate oneself. No, it cannot be done. You see how completely I am in the power of those wretches, by coming here for these hundred guineas to propitiate them."

"Ah! and this reminds me to inquire," said the baronet, "how you saved yourself from their fury, and what colouring you gave to the adventure."

"That man who enticed you back to the hut was none other than the public executioner," replied Nell Gibson. "There, start not, speak not. What matters it now who he was? I tell you all this, of course being well aware that you will take no advantage of it. The woman who came with him is his mistress, and the lad is his apprentice. Sally Melmoth — that is the woman's name — has long had a spite against me, because she fancies I have been overintimate with her flash man. But no, not for the world! Base and profligate as I know I am, there is a lower depth even than the lowest to which I have sunk, and that is the arms of the public hangman. But to return to last night's affair. The Hangman and the apprentice prevented the infuriate woman from doing me a mischief; and while the Hangman himself burst open the door and rushed after you and the young girl, his mistress and the lad kept guard upon me. Presently the Hangman came back, after a fruitlesss search; and almost at the same time the other men returned from an equally unavailing hunt after you. They were all savage enough, and I thought that everything was over with me. So I prepared for the worst. The Hangman told the other men how you had sought refuge at the public-house in the by-lane,

how you had innocently let slip the admission that you owed your life to me, and how he had enticed you back to the hut to be disposed of as the whole gang should think fit. The man that I am now living with — he who brought you down the writing-paper and who is called the Buttoner — then declared that from the first moment he suspected I had given you such information, and this suspicion on his part had been confirmed by the circumstance that I had accidentally let out to that stout man, whose name is Bencull, that you were a baronet, this circumstance proving that I knew you before. All these statements and remarks were made in my presence, and ferocious looks glared upon me from every eye. I saw that nothing but the sudden exertion of all my presence of mind could save me, and I accordingly exclaimed, 'Well, I confess that all you have said is true; but the man whose life I have this night saved was my first love, — indeed, the only man I ever sincerely and truly did love. I knew it was vain and useless to beg his life at your hands, and therefore I gave him the whispered information which led him to flee. You may kill me if you like; but I would do so over again this moment, in spite of all consequences. That is, however, no reason why I should betray you in other things, and you know right well that I would not.' They were all much struck by these remarks, but more so by the boldness of my manner. I thereupon proceeded to assure them that you would not take any proceedings against them, for fear of compromising me. As a proof thereof, I offered to come to your house to-day and obtain from you these hundred guineas for them. These assurances satisfied the whole party, the Hangman's mistress alone excepted. Three of the men have now accompanied me as far as your door, and are waiting at this moment in the street. You see, therefore," added Nell Gibson, with that calmness which was her outward characteristic, "how true I spoke when I declared that it was impossible to escape from the trammels of crime and the meshes of such companionship."

Thus ended the colloquy between this young woman and her seducer. She received the hundred guineas for which she had called, but again did she emphatically decline any boon or gift for herself. The baronet accompanied her as far as the front door of his house; and standing upon the threshold for a few minutes to look after her, he observed

by the light of the lamps that she joined three men at the corner of the street.

"Women are strange creatures!" thought the baronet to himself, as he retraced his way to his own cheerful fireside.

CHAPTER XXXV

MORE PLOTTING AND COUNTERPLOTTING

THE three men whom Nell Gibson thus joined were the Buttoner, Bencull, and the Hangman; and passing rapidly away from the fashionable street where Sir Douglas Huntingdon lived, they plunged into a low district in the close vicinity. For be it observed that in London the back windows of the palaces of the rich often look upon the noisome dens where the poor — their victims — dwell.

Entering a vile public-house, or boozing-ken, the three men and Nell Gibson proceeded to the tap-room, and as there was no one else there at the time, they were enabled to converse at their ease.

"Now, Nell," said the Buttoner, as soon as an order had been given for some liquor, "what news? I suppose you succeeded with your pal, the baronet."

"Here is the money," she observed, quietly producing gold and bank-notes for a hundred guineas.

"And you couldn't get no more out of him?" observed Bencull, savagely.

"Not a farthing," answered Nell Gibson. "I had a great deal of difficulty in getting this."

"Then he was deuced ungrateful," said the Hangman, "after all you did for him last night."

"Yes, very," replied the young woman.

"And didn't you learn nothink about that sweet young gal?" demanded Bencull.

"Only that Sir Douglas, on ascertaining who she was, restored her to her friends." And in giving this answer Nell Gibson was prompted by the same feeling which had inspired her conduct throughout toward the baronet, namely, to do nothing that should in any way injure or

annoy him, but, on the contrary, anything she could to serve him.

"Well, this is perwoking," exclaimed Bencull, "to lose that young gal after all the trouble I had in getting possession of her! But there's one more question, and that is, whether there's any chance of a safe crack in the baronet's house?"

"Eh! that's the question," said the Hangman, instinctively tapping his capacious pocket to show that he had his burglarious apparatus concealed about his person.

"I examined the hall well, as I went in and came out," said Nell Gibson, "but I don't think that an entry can be made in that quarter. In fact, I scarce think from what I saw that it would be worth while to attempt it at all."

"Now mind you, I think just the contrary," cried the Hangman, with an oath, for he had been watching Nell Gibson's countenance from under his overhanging brows, and he felt convinced in his own mind that she was doing all she could to shield the baronet.

"I say let us try the crack," exclaimed the Buttoner, sharing the Hangman's suspicions.

"And I say," added Bencull, "that if I do it alone, it shall be done. There's a coach-house and stable adjoining the baronet's mansion, and we can easy get through that way to the back of the premises. Then, when once at the back of a house, I should like to see the doors or windows that would keep me out."

"Well, then, it's agreed," said the Hangman. "Let me see," he continued, looking at a great silver watch which he pulled from his fob, "it's now half-past ten o'clock. We will wait here till twelve, and that shall be the hour. The lush is good at this ken, and the landlord knows me."

"Will you stay here, then, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner, "or go home to Bermondsey and get to bed comfortable, while I stay to do the trick?"

"Just as you like," answered Nell, with apparent indifference, though in her heart she was most anxious to get away at once.

"Well, then," said the Buttoner, also affecting the utmost carelessness in the matter, "I should think you had better get get home as quick as you can."

"So be it," said Nell Gibson, rising from her seat. Then, with a laugh, she observed to her paramour the Buttoner,

"Mind in dividing that swag you remember my regulars," and she pointed to the money on the table.

"All right, Nell," said the Buttoner; and the young woman then took her departure.

"What did you let her go for?" demanded the Hangman, savagely, the moment the door closed behind her. "Curse me if I don't think she's been playing us false again with this baronet —"

"That's just my opinion," interrupted the Buttoner, starting from his seat, "and it's 'cos why I think so that I persuaded her to be off so that I may have an opportunity of watching her. I shall be back at midnight, at all events, if not sooner."

Having thus spoken, he turned up the collar of his coat, slouched his hat over his countenance, and then hastened from the boozing-ken. On emerging into the street, he caught a glimpse of Nell Gibson by the light of a lamp, just as she was turning around the corner; and having once got upon the right track, he had no difficulty in keeping her in view, still leaving such a distance between them as to prevent her from perceiving that she was thus dogged. At first, however, she kept halting, turning around, looking and listening, every two or three minutes; but at length, being perfectly satisfied that there was no watch set upon her, she increased her pace, and made straight for the almonry in Westminster, which was about a mile from the boozing-ken she had so recently left.

The almonry is one of those dreadful neighbourhoods where pauperism is most intense, squalor most hideous, demoralization most depraved. It consists chiefly of brothels and such like dens of infamy, and forms part of the domain belonging as an endowment to Westminster Abbey. But inasmuch as loathsome hotbeds of vice and moral lazar-houses of that kind usually produce a good rent, the dean and chapter could not of course think of purging a neighbourhood which yielded them such large revenues.

In the midst of that morass so densely peopled with human reptiles, and exhaling so pestilential an atmosphere, was situated a low boozing-ken known as Meg Blowen's crib. It differed from Bencull's establishment in Jacob's Island inasmuch as it had not the appearance of a private dwelling, but was open like any other public-house, and had a large

room on the ground floor always filled at night with the vilest of the vile and the lowest of the low.

To this place did Nell Gibson wend her way, the Buttoner still following at a distance. Entering the establishment, she tarried for a few minutes in the public-room to exchange some friendly observations with her acquaintances there; and having thus dispensed her courtesies to the leading members of the gang, she passed into Meg Blowen's — that is to say, the landlady's — private room behind the bar. If we follow her thither and peep in at her proceedings, we shall observe that she requested to be furnished with pen, ink, and paper; and having written a letter, she summoned into her presence a lad whom she believed to be the most trustworthy amongst the juvenile portion of reprobates there assembled. Making him secure about his person the letter which she had written, she bade him hasten and deliver it at an address which she named, and to depart from the house the moment he placed the letter in the hands of the servant answering the door. Having thus explicitly given her instructions, she placed five shillings in the lad's hands, and he set forth with great glee to execute his commission.

But to return to the Buttoner, we must observe that on seeing Nell Gibson enter Meg Blowen's he was more than ever convinced she had some artifice in view; and looking through the window, he first saw her converse with her acquaintances in the public-room, and then pass into the private parlour behind the bar. He next saw Meg Blowen reach down the pen and ink from a shelf, take a sheet of paper out of a drawer, and then carry these writings materials into the parlour. It would have struck any individual even far less astute than the Buttoner that Nell Gibson was going to send a written communication somewhere, and he therefore remained intently upon the watch. In a few minutes he saw Nell Gibson appear at the door of the parlour, cast her eyes searchingly around upon the motley assemblage, and select one of the lads. The youth thus singled out was (as already stated) summoned by her into the parlour, and in a short time he reappeared. But instead of rejoining his companions at the table in the public-room, he at once issued forth from the establishment.

The Buttoner followed him until they were at a convenient distance from the place; then, looking back and perceiving

the coast was clear, he overtook the boy, and, clutching him by the collar, said, in a fierce tone, "Now, my lad, a word with you."

"Holloa, Mister Buttoner," exclaimed the youth, catching a glimpse of the man's countenance by the light gleaming from a window. "What do you mean by stopping me like this here?"

"Oh, you know me, do you, young feller?" cried the Buttoner. "Well, so much the better; we shall sooner come to an understanding. Now then, you have nothing to fear, because I shall let you keep whatever the young woman has just given you, and I will give you double myself into the bargain."

"Well, she gived me a guinea," said the boy, prompt with a lie and ready with a cheat.

"Wery good," observed the Buttoner. "Then of course you can show it me?"

"Won't you take a genelman's word?" asked the lad, impudently.

"No nonsense," responded the Buttoner, bestowing a hearty shake upon the youth. "Come, show us what Nell Gibson gave yer, and I'll double it."

"Well, by goles! it's turned into a crown," said the boy, producing a five-shilling piece. "It's the reg'lar counterfeit crank she's come over me."

"Nonsense," interrupted the Buttoner. Then pulling a handful of silver from his pocket, and counting out ten shillings, he said, "Now give me the letter you've got about you, walk about for half an hour or so, and go back and tell the young woman that you've done her commission quite faithful."

The ten shillings chinked in the boy's hand, the Buttoner grasped the letter, and they separated, the latter returning to the boozing-ken where he had left the Hangman and Bencull. In a few hasty words he explained to them all that had occurred, and on opening the letter, which was addressed to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, the contents were found to be as follows:

"Look well to your premises to-night. A burglary is contemplated by some of the men you saw at the hut on Shooter's Hill. I said all I could to prevent this further

annoyance toward you; but I could not succeed in staving it off. I am very much afraid that they suspected I was playing a part; if so, all these causes of suspicion will make it go hard with me sooner or later. But no matter; whatever is to happen must take its course. I would have come back to warn you of the attempt that will be made, but I am so fearful that one of the men might go and watch the street. So I prefer writing, and have found a trusty messenger. I think the men will enter by the coach-house and get around to the back of the premises; but you must keep watch at all points. One thing, however, I conjure you, that is not to adopt any means to take them into custody, nor yet to do them any unnecessary hurt; only just to defend and protect yourself. This is most likely the last time you will ever hear of or from —

"ELLEN."

The rage of the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, on reading this epistle, may be better conceived than described. Daniel Coffin muttered such awful threats against the young woman, that if his two companions had not been kindred fiends, their blood would have run cold. But when the first ebullition of their diabolical wrath was expended, they agreed after calmer and cooler deliberation to conceal for the present their knowledge of this additional treachery on Nell Gibson's part, with a view to ascertain by some means or other whether she were also betraying them in respect to the plot initiated against Larry Sampson.

By the time this resolution was fairly discussed and adopted by the three villains, the Hangman's watch showed that it was midnight. They accordingly tossed off bumpers of brandy to drink success to their undertaking, and thus inspired with a more than natural amount of brute courage, they repaired in the direction of Sir Douglas Huntingdon's mansion.

Although the street where the house was situated was a fashionable one, it was no great thoroughfare, and by the aid of the Hangman's skeleton keys the coach-house door was soon opened. The three ruffians, having thus let themselves into this portion of the establishment, locked the door behind them, and then proceeded to light a "darkey," or lantern, which also formed part of the invariable tackle

of a cracksman. In the rear of the coach-house were the stables, in which there were several horses; and there was a door behind, leading into a yard at the back of the house. The three burglars accordingly entered the stable for the purpose of passing through by the way described; but two of the horses exhibited such manifestations of terror by kicking and plunging, as if instinctively aware of the presence of intruders, that a groom who slept in a chamber above the coach-house was aroused from his repose.

Leaping from his bed, and arming himself with a pair of pistols, the groom sprang down the ladder leading to his chamber; but he was instantaneously seized by the three burglars, against whom he made a desperate resistance. The lantern was dashed out of the Hangman's hand, and the glass broken against the wall. It then fell upon a heap of straw, the light remaining unextinguished. The same blow which dashed the lantern from Coffin's hand knocked him violently down; and he lay half-stunned upon the floor for nearly a minute, during which Bencull and the Buttoner succeeded in overpowering the groom.

"Let's give him his gruel, Ben," cried the Buttoner, as they both dashed the unfortunate man with all their strength against the wall, so that he groaned heavily once, and then fell, lying motionless, either dead or else stunned beyond all hope of recovery.

But scarcely was this crime accomplished, when the sudden blazing of the straw on which the lantern had fallen startled the burglars. From the Buttoner's lips burst the cry of "Fire!" The Hangman, who had just recovered his senses, sprang as if galvanized to his feet; and Bencull at once began to throw pails of water upon the burning material, there being a pump in the coach-house. But this endeavour to extinguish the flame speedily proving utterly ineffectual, the three burglars were compelled to depart as stealthily and promptly as they could.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not as yet retired to rest. The story which he had heard from the lips of his housekeeper relative to the troubles of Theodore and Ariadne Varian — together with the singular and touching features of his interview with Nell Gibson — had furnished him with so much food for reflection that he remained sitting by his cheerful fireside, lost in serious meditation. All the rest of

the household had retired to their chambers, a profound stillness reigned through the house, and not a sound reached his ears from without. But all on a sudden this dead, deep silence — this awe-inspiring solemnity of the midnight hour — was broken by that most terrible of all alarms, the cry of "Fire!"

Startled from his reflections as if by the voice of doom thundering in his ear, and springing from his seat as if stung by an adder, Sir Douglas Huntingdon rushed from the room and bounded forth to the front door to ascertain whether the alarm were real and where the fire was. In an instant he acquired the dreadful certainty that it was neither a cruel jest nor a false rumour; for the moment he opened the front door, the vivid light flashed upon his eyes, and he beheld the flames bursting forth from the windows of the rooms above the coach-house. Already, too, were crowds hurrying thither, the alarm was spreading to the neighbouring dwellings, and all the usual features of such a scene were manifesting themselves in their variety, confusion, and excitement.

Several persons sprang toward Sir Douglas, some proffering their advice, others demanding how many people slept in his house, and in which rooms they were. In a moment he was overwhelmed with multitudinous questions and bewildered with conflicting counsels. Then came a couple of watchmen springing their rattles; next appeared three or four hulking fellows bearing along a ladder and knocking down all who got in their way, and all this while the crowd was collecting and the flames were bursting forth with increasing fury.

But Sir Douglas Huntingdon soon recovered his presence of mind, and rushing back into the house he raised the fearful alarm of fire, which did not appear as yet to have reached the ears of any inmate save himself. In a few moments all was bustle, confusion, and dismay within the walls of the mansion. Mrs. Baines came rushing down in her night-clothes, and overcome with terror, she fainted in the hall. Some of the other servants soon made their appearance also; and as the flames had now spread from the coach-house to the mansion itself, several active persons amongst the crowd began rapidly to remove all the most portable articles of furniture into the street. The ladder was raised against the front of the house in case of need, to facilitate escape from the upper stories, and messengers were despatched for a fire-engine.

Meantime the baronet, struck with horror at the idea that his groom slept over the coach-house, — and having satisfied himself that the other servants were all safe, — rushed to the back of the premises and opened the door leading from the yard to the stable. Several persons followed him; but the instant that stable-door was opened, two or three of the horses sprang madly forth, trampling down those who were in their way. Sir Douglas himself was thus much hurt by one of the affrighted animals; but rushing forward, he sought to penetrate into the stable. A volume of flame, bursting forth, drove him back; and to his horror he heard the piteous sounds of dying agony which proved that several of his horses were perishing in the flames. But the groom, — the poor unfortunate groom, — where was he? Again did Sir Douglas spring forward in order to penetrate into the coach-house; but again did a volume of smoke drive him back. A third time did he make the attempt; and now the ceiling of coach-house and stable fell in with a terrific crash, and if two of the men who had followed the baronet hither had not suddenly pulled him back as they heard the rafters giving way, he would have been buried in the ruins.

For a few moments the flames seemed stifled in this part of the premises; but as a long tongue of fire suddenly shot up, lambent and lurid again, the baronet observed by the light that the fall of the ceiling had brought down with it a considerable portion of the partition wall separating the stabling department from the mansion itself. A large portion of the interior of the dwelling-house was thus revealed, including a back staircase leading up to the bed-chambers.

At this moment the recollection flashed to the baronet's mind that he had not ere now seen Ariadne Varian amongst the other inmates of the mansion whose safety was assured. Indeed, the poor girl had been forgotten. Mrs. Baines had swooned, as already stated, and had been borne to a neighbour's house, where she fell into alarming hysterics; and, on the other hand, Sir Douglas Huntingdon's attention had been mainly directed toward the coach-house and stabling. Thus was it that the only two persons who were likely to think of poor Ariadne were prevented by circumstances from doing so, until the sudden laying bare of the private

staircase to the view of the baronet led him to pass in rapid array in his mind every chamber to which that staircase led.

The instant that the image of Ariadne thus flashed to his recollection, he gave utterance to a cry of mingled anguish and despair; then, springing forward, he clambered through the vast aperture which the falling in of the partition wall had caused, and he thus gained the interior of the dwelling-house. Passing into the hall, he found his servants and many strangers busy in removing the furniture. He made rapid inquiries concerning Ariadne, but the servants had forgotten her, and the strangers had seen no young damsel answering to her description descend the stairs.

Horrible uncertainty! All the upper part of the house was in a perfect conflagration. The street was as light as if it were daytime, and one wretched engine was making the most ineffectual attempts to quench the fire. The ladder itself had caught the flames gushing forth from the upper windows. And here we may observe that the crowds augmented; and amongst them were the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, all three hovering about to see what piece of good luck the chapter of accidents might throw in their way.

From all that has been said, hurried and brief though the description be, the reader will understand that the flames had spread like wild-fire in an incredibly short space of time. Catching the chambers above the coach-house, they had thence burst into the mansion, all the upper part of which was now enveloped in a terrific blaze. To ascend therefore to the rooms above appeared an act of frenzy or of desperation. But Ariadne's life was at stake, and this thought was sufficient to nerve the baronet with the strength and courage of a thousand.

Retracing his way from the hall to the back staircase, he rushed up it. It was the same as a besieger scaling the walls of a town, while all kinds of igneous missiles and combustibles are showered down upon him. Sir Douglas had literally to ascend through gushing flames and volumes of smoke, — flames that scorched and smoke that blinded; but he was resolved to rescue Ariadne, or perish in the attempt. In a few seconds he reached her chamber door. Bursting it open, he beheld her lying senseless on the carpet.

Through the wainscoted wall the flames were already gushing; the heat was intense, the smoke stifling. In less than a minute the maiden would have been suffocated, whereas she was as yet unscathed by the fire, and had most probably fainted through terror when endeavouring to escape from her room on the first alarm of fire.

To snatch her up in his arms and bear her forth was the work of a moment. Her head drooped back upon the baronet's shoulder, and she continued senseless as he rushed with her down the staircase. Rushed indeed! it was plunging as it were into a fiery furnace; and rapid as the lightning-flash did the thought sweep through the baronet's mind that it would be a miracle if he and his fair burden reached the street in safety. Vast masses of the partition wall kept falling in; and it seemed as if the whole building were about to give way and bury himself and Ariadne in the smoking, burning ruins. Great pieces of timber — especially rude planks belonging to the lofts above the stables — came crashing down; and thus, in the space of three or four short minutes, did the baronet and the unconscious Ariadne pass through countless perils of an appalling character. But at length the damsel's brave deliverer reached the foot of the staircase, and as he rushed with his burden through the hall and appeared with her at the street door, a tremendous shout of applause arose from the assembled multitudes.

At the very instant that Sir Douglas Huntingdon thus reached the threshold of the mansion with the still inanimate Ariadne in his arms, and in the strong glare of the terrific conflagration, the maiden was recognized by Bencull. This discovery of the fair stranger of the hut was in a moment communicated by the ruffian in a hurried whisper to the Buttoner and the Hangman, and they all three instinctively pressed forward toward the front door steps. At that very instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon felt a sudden faintness come over him, doubtless in consequence of the tremendous excitement as well as painful exertions through which he had just passed.

" Who will take care of this young lady? " he cried, as one of his footmen threw an ample cloak over the half-naked form of Ariadne.

But scarcely were the words spoken by the baronet,

when some large portion of the interior of the mansion fell in with such a terrific crash that the crowd retreated in sudden dismay and with cries of alarm; while those who were removing the furniture rushed out of the house with such haste that the baronet was thrown violently forward. In that moment of confusion, Bencull caught Ariadne Varian in his arms, and as if it were written in the book of destiny that circumstances were to favour the ruffian's designs in carrying off the still inanimate maiden, the whole roof of the house fell in at the very instant that he seized upon her. The consequence was that the fire was extinguished, or rather smothered, for the moment as completely as if a deluge of water were poured upon it; and darkness fell upon the scene, — a darkness all the more intense through succeeding the glare of the conflagration. Confusion became worse confounded amongst the crowd; and while the whole living mass fell back from the vicinage of the falling house, as the sea sweeps away from the shore upon which it has just dashed its boiling billows, it was no difficult matter for Bencull to hurry away with Ariadne in his arms. The Hangman and the Buttoner kept close at his heels, an empty hackney-coach was encountered at the corner of the street, and the three villains entered it with their lovely burden.

But when the driver asked whither he was to go, the men were thrown into a sudden perplexity. Bencull, however, hastily whispered, " Didn't Nell Gibson talk of a certain Marquis of Leveson who was Mrs. Gale's best customer? "

" To be sure," whispered the Buttoner. " Why not take her direct to him? "

" Ah! do you think of selling her to that marquis? " said the Hangman. " Well, I know where he lives, I have been in his house." Then turning to the coachman who stood at the door, and thrusting some silver into his hand, Daniel Coffin ordered him to drive to Albemarle Street.

In a few minutes the vehicle stopped at the door of Leveson House, and it happened that just at the same moment Brockman, the favourite valet of the marquis, was entering the mansion. Seeing the hackney-coach stop, he inquired of those inside what their business was; and as it was pitch-dark within the vehicle, the valet did not observe how

villainous were the countenances of the fellows whom he thus addressed.

"The fact is," said the Hangman, in a rapid whisper, "we have got a young gal that is intended for his lordship. She's in a fit, and so you can just lift her into the house without fearing any noise, and one of us will call for the recompense the first thing to-morrow morning."

Brockman naturally concluded from this statement that the fellows had been hired by his master, or else by some one in his lordship's interest, to perform this particular service, and he therefore at once consented to receive the maiden without asking another question. The housekeeper who was sitting up for Brockman was summoned, and with her aid the valet lifted Ariadne out of the coach and carried her into the mansion.

The vehicle then drove away, the three ruffians congratulating themselves not only on having done something to annoy Sir Douglas Huntingdon, whom they regarded as a sort of enemy, but likewise on having adopted so bold a step as to convey the damsel direct to the spot where her charms were marketable, instead of conducting the bargain through the medium of a middle woman, such as Mrs. Gale. But not for a moment did those ruffians experience the slightest remorse for having caused so terrible a conflagration in that house beneath the ruins of which the charred and blackened remains of the unfortunate groom were indubitably buried.

Meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had been thrown down and stunned by the rush of people from the front door of his mansion, was borne to a neighbour's house, where immediate restoratives were applied. On coming to himself his first inquiry was for Ariadne; but those by whom he was surrounded could give him no information on the subject. Supposing that she had been taken to some other house in the vicinage, he sallied forth into the street again to make further inquiries on the subject. But neither from his own servants, who were watching over the property removed out of the house, nor from any of the crowd, could he obtain a satisfactory answer. In fact, no tidings could he glean of Ariadne from the moment that he sank down insensible in front of his own door.

Tortured with cruel misgivings, he sped from house to

house prosecuting his inquiries, up and down the street, but all in vain. At length he was compelled, through sheer exhaustion, to abandon any further research for the present, and retire to a neighbouring hotel where he took up his temporary quarters.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ANOTHER LAMB IN THE LION'S DEN

On recovering her senses, Ariadne Varian found herself in bed; and sweeping her eyes rapidly around, as a flood of recollections poured in unto her brain, she at once saw that it was not the same chamber which she had occupied at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Handsome as that chamber was, this was far more elegantly furnished, and denoted a more exquisite refinement in taste, or rather in luxury.

A middle-aged woman, looking like a housekeeper, was seated by the bedside; and though the instant Ariadne opened her eyes, this female endeavoured to look kindly and speak soothingly, yet it was not with the same motherly tenderness evinced by Mrs. Baines.

No suspicion of treachery, however, entered Ariadne's mind. Collecting her ideas, she remembered that she had been alarmed with cries of "Fire," that springing from her couch she had beheld the ominous glare at the window of her chamber, and that the noise of the gathering crowds in the streets had reached her ears. She also recollected that, overcome with terror, she had felt her limbs failing and her strength abandoning her; and as she remembered nothing more until the instant she awoke in this strange apartment where she now found herself, she naturally concluded that her reminiscences had been interrupted by a long swoon.

Utterly unaware, therefore, how her life was saved, and who had saved it, — unconscious, indeed, of every feature and detail of the terrible conflagration, — her first hurried questions were to inquire where she was, what extent of damage had been done, and whether any lives were lost. Then, before even a single one of these queries was answered,

she exclaimed with looks and accents of torturing suspense, "Tell me, is Sir Douglas Huntingdon safe?"

The questions so hurriedly and excitedly put were each and all equally puzzling to the Marquis of Leveson's housekeeper, who was even more ignorant than Ariadne herself relative to what had occurred, seeing that she, of course, did not know who the damsel was, whence she had been brought, or that any particular house had been on fire. Being, however, of an astute and cunning disposition, as the housekeeper of such a nobleman ought to be, the woman gave Ariadne such vague and general, but at the same time reassuring answers, that while she tranquillized the maiden's mind on the one hand, she elicited on the other fresh questions which in themselves were explanations of what had occurred.

"You assure me, then, that my kind-hearted benefactor, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, is safe?" said Ariadne.

"Yes, quite safe."

"Is the house totally consumed? And am I indebted to a neighbour's hospitality for this asylum?"

"I am afraid the damage is great, and you are freely welcome here."

"Was it the baronet who saved me?" inquired Ariadne, secretly wishing in her heart that the response would be in the affirmative.

"Yes, he rescued you. You were senseless, I suppose?"

"I had fainted through terror the moment I heard the alarm of fire."

"Ah! poor young lady, and enough too to frighten you! I presume you are some relation to Sir Douglas Huntingdon?"

"Not the least," returned Ariadne. "He is my benefactor, that is to say, he has behaved handsomely, kindly, and nobly toward me, although I have only known him for I may say a few hours, indeed since last night. But this reminds me that his excellent housekeeper, Mrs. Baines, has behaved like a mother to me. Do you know whether she is quite safe?"

"I have already told you," answered Lord Leveson's housekeeper, "that no lives have been lost."

"Is Mrs. Baines here in this house?"

"No, but at a neighbour's."

"Ah! I understand," said Ariadne. "When so dreadful

an occurrence as a fire takes place, in a house, the inmates speedily become dispersed throughout the neighbourhood."

"Yes, that is always the case."

"And now tell me beneath whose roof I have found an asylum?" asked Ariadne.

"Have you ever heard of a nobleman named Leveson — the Marquis of Leveson?" inquired the housekeeper, with becoming caution.

"No, never — Oh, yes, I answered too hastily," said Ariadne, suddenly correcting herself, as she remembered having read that the Mr. Dysart who was hung a short time back was the husband of the Marquis of Leveson's niece. "I have heard his lordship's name mentioned, now that I think of it, but quite in a casual manner!"

"Well, then, should you be pleased or otherwise," asked the housekeeper, "if you heard that you were beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson?"

"I should esteem myself highly honoured," returned Ariadne, with that simplicity of prejudice in favour of the aristocracy which was natural with one who had never been taught, either by lessons or by experience, to loathe, hate, and abominate that aristocracy as the greatest curse that God in his wrath or Satan in his malignity ever inflicted upon a country.

"Well, then," said the housekeeper, "this is the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson, and I occupy an important post in his lordship's household. His lordship is an excellent man, and I am sure that you will like him amazingly when you come to know him. Besides which, he is certain to feel a great interest in you after your adventure of this night. And then, too, there is this beautiful niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart, one of the handsomest and finest women in England. Ah! how unfortunate she has been," added the housekeeper, shaking her head with much apparent solemnity.

"Yes, I know to what you allude," said Ariadne, with a profound sigh, as the thought of Dysart's fate, by a natural association, conjured up ideas of Newgate, and forcibly reminded her of her brother Theodore's recent misfortunes. "It was when reading certain circumstances in the newspaper that I first became acquainted with the name of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Well, my dear young lady," said the housekeeper, "I

need not tell you that it was a sad and shocking blow for his lordship and his lordship's niece. But I see that I must not chatter in this way to you any longer. Pray compose yourself to rest. I will leave a light in your room, and on this table by your bedside you will find cordials, restoratives, and various kinds of refreshment, should you feel exhausted or faint. I will visit you early in the morning, and hope to learn that you have slept off the effects of the alarm and nervousness produced by the fire."

The housekeeper then withdrew, and Ariadne speedily sank into a profound slumber, little suspecting into what a maze of perils she had been so perfidiously betrayed.

The first thing in the morning Brockman acquainted the marquis with the arrival of a young lady in the middle of the night; and as the valet had been conversing with the housekeeper only a few minutes before he repaired to his master's chamber, he had gleaned from her lips all that she herself had gleaned from Ariadne's. The Marquis of Leveson was unfeignedly astonished when he heard of this arrival, and Brockman saw at once that his master had really not expected any such occurrence.

But while they were still deliberating upon the event, and the valet was explaining to the marquis how the fair stranger had spoken of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the fire which had occurred at his house, a footman knocked at the door to announce that a man, who declined giving his name, solicited an immediate audience of his lordship. That this was one of the men who had brought the fair stranger to the mansion during the night was presumable; and the marquis, anxious to learn more of the matter, at once proceeded to the room where the individual was waiting.

The visitor was none other than the Hangman, dressed out in his very best apparel; but his ill-favoured countenance and sinister look were not much improved by the advantages of a Sunday garb. However, the marquis did not expect to encounter an elegant gentleman in the individual who had brought the fair stranger to his house, but at the same time he little suspected that the ruffian who now stood in his presence was the public executioner, the man who had been admitted into the joint confidence of his niece Ernestina and the prince regent relative to the affair of the deceased Paul Dysart.

" Well, and what is your business? " inquired the nobleman.

" I called about the young girl that me and a couple of pals of mine left here last night," said the Hangman, with the most brazen effrontery.

" And pray," demanded the marquis, assuming a stern look, " what made you bring that young female hither? "

" You see, my lord," replied Daniel Coffin, " Sir Douglas Huntingdon's house was burned to the ground during the past night. Me and my pals happened to be mingling quite promiscuous in the crowd that the fire collected, and, lo and behold! the baronet brought down a young lady in his arms, half-naked and in a fainting state. So, seeing that she was beautiful as an angel, we got possession of her, whipped her into a coach, and brought her here — "

" But why did you bring her hither? " demanded the marquis. " That is the point I want you to clear up."

" Oh, there's no gammon about me, my lord," exclaimed Coffin. " The fact is, I've been in those secret chambers of your lordship's, and have looked at all the pretty things in the shape of statues and paintings — "

" Ah! " ejaculated the nobleman, the truth flashing to his comprehension. " Then you are — ".

" Dan'el Coffin, at your lordship's service," was the reply. " If your lordship wants references," added the fellow, with cool self-sufficiency, " I can give 'em either to Lady Ernestina or the prince regent."

" Well, I know now who you are and all about you," said the marquis, scarcely able to conceal the sensation of utter loathing which he experienced as he gazed upon the public executioner. " In plain terms, then, you fancied that in consequence of having seen my private apartments, you would not be doing wrong in bringing the young girl to me? "

" That's just what it is, my lord," answered the Hangman.

" But do you know who she is? " inquired the marquis. " What is her station in life? Is she the mistress of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, a relative, or a servant? In fact, tell me all about her."

" She's not a servant, but looks like a very genteel young person, almost a lady, I should say. But one thing is very

certain, she's not the baronet's mistress; for I happen to know that she hasn't even known him many hours."

"But a few minutes are enough to ruin a woman's virtue, let alone a few hours," said the marquis. "However, that is of little consequence, since the girl is really beautiful. And now after all you have said, do you mean me to understand that you are not well acquainted with her? Of course you are! What is her name?"

"I can't tell your lordship — I know no more than Adam," was the reply. "The fact is, in a few words, me and my pals were at Shooter's Hill on a little business the night before last, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was travelling that way, fell into our hands. Within the same hour, another accident also threw this young lady in our way; and, to be brief, they both succeeded in effecting their escape and getting off together. So it was natural that the baronet should give the young girl an asylum, and that's the way she came to be at his house. But hasn't your lordship seen her yet?"

"Not yet. I am, however, told that she is really very beautiful," observed the marquis.

"Beautiful," cried the Hangman, with a diabolical leer, "she's so sweetly pretty that if I hadn't thought your lordship would give a good price for her, I should have kept her for myself. I don't know much of these matters, but I must say that you need only look in her face to see that she's innocence itself."

"Well, and so now you are come for your reward?" said the marquis. "What do you expect?"

"Fifty guineas won't hurt your lordship," answered the Hangman.

"There, take that," said the marquis, throwing down his purse, which he knew contained more than the sum demanded.

Daniel Coffin picked up the purse from the table where the nobleman had tossed it, and then took his departure, well pleased with the success of his visit.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A CATASTROPHE

THE chamber to which Ariadne Varien had been consigned at Leveson House was the one that communicated with the dressing-room whence a secret door opened into the private suite of apartments already so often referred to in our narrative. This bedchamber was sometimes occupied by the marquis himself; but he as frequently slept in a room on a higher story, for the sake of the convenience offered by contiguous baths. Thus, on the particular occasion now referred to, the nobleman had spent the night in this last-mentioned chamber; and therefore was it that the housekeeper, with fiendish forethought, consigned Ariadne to the one whence the communication led to the private suite of apartments.

On awaking after some hours of refreshing sleep, Ariadne recalled to mind everything that had occurred during the past night; but still it was without the slightest misgiving or suspicion she remembered that she was now beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson.

While she was thus collecting her ideas, the housekeeper entered the room, bearing a tray, containing the young maiden's breakfast.

"Is it very late?" inquired Ariadne, fancying that she must have slept a long time.

"It is a little past ten o'clock," replied the housekeeper; "but you will do well to take your breakfast in bed as you have passed through so much excitement and alarm during the past night. Moreover, you have no apparel of any kind here, and I must see about getting some clothes presently. His lordship will come and pay you a visit immediately, and will then confer with you on your plans and prospects."

"What, here!" ejaculated Ariadne, surprised at the remark and conceiving that she had not properly understood it.

"And why not?" asked the housekeeper, with a smile. "The marquis is old enough to be your father; indeed you are a mere child to him. Moreover, I am going to remain here with you, my love."

Still Ariadne experienced a secret displeasure at the idea of a stranger visiting her bedroom. Her pure-mindedness and natural delicacy shrank from the thought; but she scarcely dared to venture any further remonstrance, as she felt that she was under great obligations to those who had given her an asylum beneath that roof. Besides which, as she had no garments to put on, — not a stitch nor rag in the whole world beyond the night-drapery that she wore, — she could not rise and dress herself to receive the marquis, and it was natural that he should wish to know whom he had beneath his roof. But this reflection suddenly gave rise to another: namely, what account could she render of herself? What name should she pass by? To refuse all replies to the questions that might be put would seem not only suspicious, but rude to a degree; and yet, on the other hand, how could she tell the truth? How announce the name of Ariadne Varian? Ah! the poor girl was indeed unused to the arts of deceit and unskilled in the ways of duplicity.

She was sitting up in bed, pondering mournfully upon these points, and partaking of some chocolate which the housekeeper had poured out for her, when a gentle knock was heard at the door. The housekeeper at once opened it, and the marquis entered the room. Ariadne instinctively shrank beneath the bedclothes, while her cheeks were suffused with blushes.

"How is the fair guest with whose presence circumstances have thus honoured me?" said the marquis, assuming his softest voice and blandest manner. "Really, the incidents which have thus brought you, young lady, within these walls are so romantic that they invest you with additional charms."

Ariadne said nothing. She was overwhelmed with confusion. But averting her blushing countenance, she felt such strange sensations come over her — sensations of mingled alarm, outraged modesty, and bitter annoyance — that she was ready to burst into tears.

" You are welcome to my house, young lady," resumed the marquis, " most welcome. Indeed the longer you grace it with your presence, the happier I shall feel. My excellent housekeeper here will see that your slightest wants shall not merely be attended to, but even anticipated — "

" I thank your lordship," murmured Ariadne, now recovering the power of utterance, " but I shall not intrude on your lordship's hospitality much longer. Indeed, if your lordship's housekeeper will only be kind enough to furnish me with apparel, I shall at once prepare to take my departure," she added, her sense of violated decency now triumphing over her fears and imparting firmness to her tone.

" Well, well, my dear young lady, you are your own mistress, no doubt," said the marquis, believing Ariadne's conduct to be nothing more nor less than mere affectation; for he could not fancy that it was possible for her to have passed even a few short hours in the dwelling of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and have come forth pure and chaste. " But methinks that this precipitation on your part to leave my mansion, where there is every disposition to treat you kindly — "

" My lord," interrupted Ariadne, now turning her eyes toward the marquis while her countenance was flushed with indignation, " I know not what may be the manners and customs of fashionable life, but in the sphere to which I belong, your presence in my chamber would not only be deemed a violation of all the rules of hospitality, but a positive outrage and insult."

" Upon my honour, you take my conduct most unkindly," exclaimed the marquis. " But I will withdraw for the present, since you appear to wish it."

He then quitted the room, making a rapid sign to the housekeeper; and the moment the door closed behind him, Ariadne burst into a flood of tears.

" My dear girl, don't take on like this," said the housekeeper. " Why, I am really surprised at you. His lordship did not mean any offence, how could he? He perhaps spoke in rather an offhand manner; but then that was his familiarity of tone toward one in whom he felt interested. I can assure you that the marquis is generosity and liberality personified. If you asked him for any boon on which you

set your mind, you would have it. And young ladies have their little whims and caprices, you know — "

" Good heavens! what means this strange language? " cried Ariadne, all the suspicions and misgivings which within the last few minutes had been aroused in her mind now becoming excited to a painful degree. " If you really wish to befriend me — "

" What can I do, young lady? Speak! "

" Procure me some apparel. I cannot offer to recompense you at this moment, but in the course of the day, when once I shall have seen Sir Douglas Huntingdon — "

" Ah! " ejaculated the housekeeper, now perfectly convinced in her own mind that Ariadne was the baronet's mistress. " But wherefore should you be in such haste to quit this mansion? Do you desire to return to that Sir Douglas Huntingdon of whom you have spoken? "

" I do — he is my only friend," exclaimed Ariadne, with passionate vehemence, and not reflecting for a moment what interpretation might be put upon the manner in which she spoke of the baronet. " But will you, will you, my good woman, procure me some fitting apparel? Surely Lady Ernestina Dysart would take compassion upon me, or one of the female servants might lend me a gown, a shawl, a bonnet, in fine, the barest necessaries — "

" To be sure, my dear girl," said the housekeeper. " I will procure all you want in good time."

" At once! " cried Ariadne, springing from the couch. " Procure me some raiment, I will dress myself with all possible haste, and will then intrude no longer — "

" Ah! you are wrong to speak of intrusion," interrupted the housekeeper. " But come into this dressing-room. Here are all the requisites of the toilet, and I will soon procure you fitting apparel."

" Oh, then I shall thank you indeed! " exclaimed Ariadne, somewhat tranquillized by this assurance.

But while she was combing out her beautiful long flaxen hair in the dressing-room adjoining the bedchamber, the housekeeper took advantage of a moment when the maiden's back was turned to touch the secret spring and open the door leading into the suite of private apartments.

" I asked you just now whether you really wished to return

to Sir Douglas Huntingdon," resumed the wily woman, "and you declared that such was your desire."

"He is my benefactor, I have already told you as much," said Ariadne. "I am under obligations to him — deep obligations," she repeated, with a profound sigh, as she thought of her brother to whom the baronet had despatched his valet James with reassuring messages and with money.

"You are wrong, young lady, you are wrong," continued the housekeeper, "to think of returning to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, when you may be so much happier at the house of the Marquis of Leveson. Behold, my dear girl, behold this splendidly furnished apartment into which the dressing-room opens," she exclaimed, drawing back the secret door. "All these rooms that you see shall be yours, with domestics to wait upon you, if you will only consent to remain here. Ah! my dear young lady, I am sure I shall not supplicate in vain."

The amazement produced by these words overwhelmed as it were the alarm previously excited, and Ariadne, desisting for a moment from the operation of combing out her hair, turned upon the woman a look so full of wonder and startled inquiry that it even expressed her feelings more eloquently than the words to which she simultaneously gave utterance.

"Wherefore should you invite me thus to remain within these walls? Wherefore should you offer me the inducement of these elegant rooms? Indeed, what know you of me, that such a proposal should have emanated from your lips?"

"Ah! young lady," said the housekeeper, adopting a tone of gentle persuasion, "did you not observe that the marquis surveyed you with admiration? And surely, surely you will not be so cruel as to treat him with indifference or scorn?"

"Good heavens! what words are these that I hear?" exclaimed Ariadne, the colour coming and going in rapid transitions upon her cheeks. "It is impossible that this can be the house of the Marquis of Leveson! Impossible that any nobleman would have intruded into the chamber which his hospitality had afforded to a young and friendless girl! Impossible that any female in his service would dare

to address me in the language which has just fallen from your lips!"

"Now, if it comes to the matter of that," exclaimed the housekeeper, suddenly throwing off the mask and speaking in a tone of coarse insolence, "I don't see why you should pretend to be so very particular. Come, come, young woman, here's enough of this nonsense, and I have already adopted the coaxing tone too long. I suppose you meant to sell yourself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, even if you have not done it already. But let me tell you that the Marquis of Leveson will prove more profitable to you. I saw just now by his lordship's words that he does not regard you as the stubbornest of prudes, or yet as a dragon of virtue; and I know his humour well enough to feel assured that he won't waste much time in coming to the point with you. Indeed he has only retired for a few minutes, just to give me the opportunity of being explicit with you."

A mortal paleness gradually spread itself over Ariadne's countenance, as these words smote upon her ears, carrying as it were the blight of a pestilence down into her very soul; and, staggering toward a seat, she sank upon it crushed and overwhelmed by a terrible consternation. A faintness seized upon her, a film spread rapidly over her eyes, and she felt that her senses were abandoning her, when the sudden sound of a door opening and shutting recalled her to herself. Startled back as it were into complete consciousness, she threw her affrighted looks around, and perceived that she was now alone. The housekeeper had left her, and it was the sound of the outer door of the bedchamber that she had heard opening and closing so abruptly. But that door almost immediately opened again, and now it was the Marquis of Leveson who reappeared.

A scream of terror burst from the lips of Ariadne; and not only did alarm, but also a feeling of outraged modesty prompt her to fly from his presence, for be it understood that she was in a state of semi-nudity, having on nothing but the night-gear which left her neck and bosom all exposed. As she turned thus abruptly away from the approaching marquis, she beheld the door which the housekeeper had left open when she displayed the handsomely furnished apartment to which it led.

"Beautiful girl," exclaimed the marquis, catching sight

of her naked charms and instantaneously inflamed by the view. "Resistance is vain! besides, wherefore prove so coy — so cruel — "

But Ariadne had rushed forward into the apartment to which the secret door opened, and as she shut it promptly behind her, she turned around in eager search for the lock, that she might secure herself against the marquis. But what was her surprise when she beheld nothing but the uniform and unbroken surface of the handsomely papered wall, no lock, no handle, not even so much as a keyhole, to indicate the presence of a door. The thought flashed to her mind that she had fallen into some new snare, and, overcome with a sense of terror now wrought up to an excruciating pitch, she sank down into one of the splendid armchairs with which the apartment was furnished. But at the same instant did another rending scream burst from her lips, as the sharp click of the perfidious mechanism fell upon her ears, and as her arms and shoulders were clasped by the springs that started forth from the chair!

At the same time the invisible door by which she had entered that room was opened, and the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance. Instantaneously shutting the door behind him, he stood feasting his eyes upon the charms of his intended victim. But, oh, his hard heart melted not with pity as that sweet countenance was upturned with an expression so earnestly imploring, so pathetically entreating toward his own; no pity nor remorse had he for that damsel's sake; all his ideas, all his aspirations were concentrated in the burning heat of one absorbing passion.

"My lord, my lord," murmured Ariadne, "have mercy upon me."

But as the maiden uttered these words in a dying tone, her head drooped forward, the gaspings of her breath ceased, and the palpitations of her snowy bosom were no longer perceptible.

"She has fainted," said the marquis to himself. "But she is not the first who — "

The nobleman's reflection was suddenly cut short by a mortal alarm which seized upon him, for as he stooped down and looked at Ariadne, it suddenly struck him that she was dead.

He hastily placed his hand upon her heart; but it beat

not, and the bosom which his hand thus pressed in its nudity was as still as if death were indeed there. With a cold shudder running through his entire form, he touched the secret spring which released her from the grasp of the mechanism, and lifting her in his arms he bore her back into the bedchamber and laid her upon the couch. Still did she continue senseless; and if that were not the sleep of death, then assuredly was it a swoon of a most alarming character.

Vainly did the marquis sprinkle her countenance with water and apply a scent-bottle to her nostrils. She moved not, her heart was still, her pulse imperceptible, and all vital colouring was disappearing from her lips. Her nails — those beautifully shaped nails, so pellucid with their roseate tint a few moments before — now were becoming of a bluish appearance, and this circumstance gave a still deeper shock to the soul of the marquis, for he regarded it as the unmistakable sign of death.

He rang the bell, and the housekeeper answered the summons. Nothing could equal the woman's dismay on beholding Ariadne thus stretched lifeless on the couch; and the marquis saw by the sudden horror which seized upon her what she also thought, — his worst fears being then confirmed, that the maiden was indeed dead.

Almost wild with alarm, he bade the housekeeper hasten and fetch Lady Ernestina thither; and in a minute or two the woman returned accompanied by his lordship's niece. But Ernestina at once declared that all human aid was unavailing, and that the damsel was no more.

Nothing could exceed the excruciation of alarm which now reigned in that chamber. What was to be done? How dispose of the corpse? How account for the presence of the young female in the house at all? The marquis paced to and fro in the chamber like a madman. The housekeeper fell upon her knees by the side of the bed, and began giving way to the bitterest lamentations, while Lady Ernestina, conquering her emotions somewhat in the presence of the awful dilemma, stood gazing upon the beautiful face of the dead, revolving in her mind a thousand different schemes for the disposal of the corpse.

"Good heavens! what a calamity, what an awful calamity!" exclaimed the marquis, wringing his hands at one

moment, and then gesticulating with them frantically the next.

"Oh, it is enough to hang us all," groaned the housekeeper. "What on earth will become of us?"

"Calm yourselves, calm yourselves, I beseech you," said Ernestina. "It is only by extreme prudence, circumspection, and caution that we shall avoid discovery, that is to say, if the occurrence must be concealed. But why not let it be avowed? The girl was not murdered, at least not murdered in the positive meaning of the term — "

"But there must be a coroner's inquest, and all the annoyances and dangers of an inquiry," said the marquis. "How am I to account for the girl being here? Under what circumstances am I to say she died? If recognized and identified as the one who was rescued last night from the fire at Huntingdon's house, how came she here? Wherefore was she brought to such a distance, instead of being taken to some dwelling close at hand? Ah! the case is fraught with terrible suspicion, Ernestina, you must see that it is."

"Oh, yes," said the housekeeper, with bitter lamentations. "It must be hushed up — it must be hushed up."

"Then do you know what is to be done?" said Ernestina, a sudden idea striking her. "You must send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon, tell him all that has happened, and throw yourself upon his mercy. There is nothing else to be done."

"But if this girl was his mistress," exclaimed the marquis, "he might seek a cruel revenge. And yet it is hardly possible that he can care anything for her, seeing that their acquaintance has only been of a few hours — Yes, yes," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, "your advice must be adopted, Ernestina. Huntingdon would not ruin an old friend."

"Besides," observed the nobleman's niece, "you will ascertain who the young girl was, and whether there will be much inquiry made by relatives or by friends into the circumstances of her death."

"Be it then as you say," observed the marquis. "And now, Ernestina, for God's sake take this distracted woman away with you, and endeavour to console her — or at all events to make her hold her peace — while I send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

Lady Ernestina accordingly persuaded the housekeeper

to accompany her away from the chamber of death, and the marquis, quitting the room also, and locking the door behind him, hastened to make a confidant of his valet Brockman, whom he despatched forthwith in search of the baronet. In about half an hour Brockman returned accompanied by Sir Douglas, whom he had found at a hotel in the immediate neighbourhood of his own ruined mansion; and as the valet had not given the baronet the least intimation of wherefore his presence was required in Albemarle Street, he was naturally much surprised at being thus peremptorily summoned thither. At first, indeed, he had refused to yield to Brockman's request, fancying that some treacherous or spiteful trick might be meditated against him in revenge for the part he had played in rescuing Louisa Stanley from the power of the Marquis of Leveson. But perceiving, by Brockman's manner, that the affair was urgent, although the valet declined entering into explanatory particulars, Sir Douglas ultimately agreed to accompany him to Leveson House.

On arriving there, the baronet was at once conducted into an apartment where he found the marquis alone, but pacing to and fro in a state of dreadful excitement and agitation.

"Good heavens, Leveson," he exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

"Tell me, Huntingdon, tell me, before I speak a word to the point," said the Marquis of Leveson, advancing hurriedly, and seizing the baronet by the hand, "tell me whether there is any ill feeling on your part toward me?"

"Not a whit," cried Sir Douglas; "on the contrary, I was fearful that you would break off your friendship with me on account of my intrusion upon your proceedings at so critical a moment the day before yesterday. But, my dear Leveson, as you called at Stratton Street and saw Miss Bathurst on that morning, you are of course acquainted with the entire mystery relative—"

"Ah! my dear Huntingdon, all the Miss Bathursts, and Clara Stanleys, and Venetias in the world are at this moment nothing to me," interrupted the marquis; "for you see before you one of the most miserable of men—"

"Indeed! I do observe that you are pale and agitated—very pale," cried the baronet. "But what is the matter?

Is there anything I can do for you? Though having troubles enough of my own at this moment, what with the burning down of my house, the loss of a young lady in whom I had suddenly conceived the deepest interest — "

"Oh! now, now I am more wretched than ever," exclaimed the marquis. "Huntingdon, my honour, almost my life, is in your hands — "

"Good heavens! what mean you?" cried the baronet, nearly as much stunned as he was bewildered.

"Will you swear to screen me, swear to hold me harmless, swear not to betray me — "

"Yes, yes, I will swear anything, if you only relieve me from this torturing suspense."

"Know, then, that the young lady whom you have lost — "

"Good God! has she fallen into your hands?"

"Yes, but I knew not — "

"Where is she? Where is she?" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, seizing the marquis by the collar of his coat. "Oh, if you have dared to harm a hair of her head — "

"Heavens! how shall I tell you the dreadful truth!" almost yelled forth the wretched marquis as he writhed in the grasp of the baronet.

"Villain, you have ravished her," thundered Sir Douglas, hurling the marquis from him with terrific violence. Then, dashing his open palms forcibly against his brow in all the wild fury of excitement, he exclaimed, "Would to God that you had reported her death to me rather than this!"

"Her death, her death," repeated the marquis, leaning upon the chair against which the baronet had flung him. "Yes, it is her death that I have to report, for she is a spotless virgin so far as I am concerned."

The baronet staggered back a few paces, and then reeled as if seized with a sudden vertigo; for despite the confusion into which his ideas were suddenly thrown, still was there a strong lurid beam penetrating them with a horrible clearness, bringing forth in dread relief the fact that the young girl was no more.

"Dead," he at length muttered between his teeth, "dead, do you say?" he repeated, in a low, thick voice, as with a pale countenance and with wildness in his eyes he gazed upon the marquis.

"Yes, she is dead," answered Leveson, "and if all my

fortune could bring her back to life, it should be surrendered up."

"Tell me how this happened," said the baronet, pressing his hands to his brow as if to steady his reeling brain. Then, sitting down, he appeared to await the explanations with the vacancy of look and the abstracted manner of one whose senses are in a whirl.

"I will tell you all — everything," said the marquis, in a hurried tone of breathless agitation, "and then must I throw myself upon your mercy. In the middle of the night some men brought that girl hither, I knew not who she was, I never saw her before, I had not bargained with them for the service which they thus thrust upon me. The men told some tale about you and the young girl having been together at a hut on Shooter's Hill."

"Ah! then I understand who the villains were," exclaimed the baronet, indignation once more bringing back the colour to his cheeks. "But go on — go on."

"They brought the girl here, then, after the fire at your house," resumed the marquis, "and she was received into the mansion. Believing her, in plain truth, to have been your mistress, I fancied that her coyness was assumed, and perhaps I was too hasty — too importunate. At all events she sought refuge in that very room which contains the chairs, — you know what chairs I mean, — and sinking into one, the fright I presume was too much for her — and — and she died."

"Poor Ariadne!" murmured the baronet to himself, and, averting his head, he dashed away a tear.

"On my life," continued the marquis, "I have told you the truth, Huntingdon. I have explained the events precisely as they took place, and I need scarcely say that every possible remedy and restorative was applied — "

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas, suddenly. "Let me see her."

This command, uttered with a stern and abrupt imperiousness, was at once obeyed by the Marquis of Leveson, and he conducted the baronet to the room where Ariadne lay. On the threshold of the chamber, Sir Douglas turned suddenly around and motioned the marquis not to follow him; then, closing the door abruptly, he remained alone in the chamber with the dead.

Advancing slowly, hesitatingly, and with a sensation of awe, to the side of the couch, Sir Douglas Huntingdon beheld all that remained of Ariadne Varian, stretched like a beautiful statue before his eyes. Her light hair, swept entirely away from her brows, fell back over the pillow upon which her head rested, thus revealing the whole of that sweet countenance, with the delicately chiselled and faultless features on which a smile of angelic resignation appeared to rest, as if in the very moment of dissolution she had experienced the certainty that she was about to pass from the woes of earth to the joys of heaven. Her eyelids were shut close, with the brown lashes resting upon the alabaster cheeks, so that she appeared as if she were only sleeping. The lips had remained slightly apart, affording a glimpse of the pearls within, and thus strengthening the impression that she was not dead but only slept. The slight drapery which she wore had settled in such a way as to develop the gentle undulations and softly swelling contours of her sylphid form; the arms remained gracefully rounded, like those of one in a slumber, and not with the rigidity of the last sleep from which there is no awakening upon earth; and the symmetrical beauty of the lower limbs was likewise revealed by the plaits of her virgin vesture. Alas! that this should be the raiment of the dead.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon gazed upon her with a sort of incredulity that she was really no more, and for nearly a minute he thought she was only sleeping. He hoped so, and he earnestly prayed within himself that such might be the case. Yet the longer he looked down upon that alabaster countenance, the fainter grew that hope; while the stronger became the conviction that she was indeed no more.

"Yes, her spirit has fled for ever," he inwardly mused. "The young, the innocent, the beautiful, has gone to that heaven which is her fitting home. She looks as if she did but sleep, and yet there is the absence of all vital colouring from those cheeks, and the breath comes not from between those lips. Her form is motionless, though not yet stricken with the rigidity of death. Oh, Ariadne, I knew thee but for a few hours, and yet in that short time — But this is childish on my part," ejaculated the baronet aloud, as he made a sudden effort to master his emotions. Then, feeling that his eyes were dim and that tears were trickling down his

cheeks, he no longer sought to check the natural current of his grief, and sitting down on the edge of the couch, he took the hand — the small cold hand — of Ariadne in his own; and averting his eyes from her marble countenance, he said aloud, and with a passionate outburst of feeling, "I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance, which was so lovely in its animation."

Then for upwards of a minute he remained in that position, wrapped up in the deepest thought, until at length regaining somewhat of his lost firmness, he rose abruptly, threw one last lingering look upon the deceased, and then quitted the room.

On the landing outside he found the marquis waiting for him, and in silence did they proceed back to the apartment where they had previously conversed.

"That young girl, Lord Leveson," said the baronet, in a deep and solemn tone, "has a brother who will sooner or later come to demand an account of his sister. Of me will he demand that account, inasmuch as I had written to him to state that she had found an asylum — an honourable asylum — with me; and when he comes therefore to inquire for her, what answer am I to give?"

"You will not compromise me?" said the marquis, in a tone of earnest entreaty. "Can it not be averred that, rendered houseless by the fire, the damsel was consigned to the care of my housekeeper or niece, whichever you like to name, but that she died of the fright produced by that conflagration?"

"Yes, this tale must indeed be told," said the baronet. "And now let instructions be given for the funeral of the poor girl."

"And what name is to be placed upon her coffin?" asked Lord Leveson, inwardly rejoiced to find that no exposure was to take place.

"What name?" repeated the baronet. "There is no reason now why her real name should be concealed, therefore upon her coffin-lid have inscribed the words, Ariadne Varian."

"What!" ejaculated the marquis, immediately struck by the name, "surely this poor girl —"

"Yes, I know what is passing in your mind," said Huntingdon, in a mournful tone. "She was the sister of him the

narrative of whose escape you have read in the newspapers."

"But her brother," exclaimed the marquis, "is he not a fugitive? And will he ever come to claim his sister?"

"If I can obtain for him a free pardon, for which I am about to interest myself," returned the baronet. "But of all this no matter; suffice it for you, Lord Leveson, to know that I am interested in the young man's behalf. Would to God that it were within the range of mortal power to recall his sister to life!"

With these words Sir Douglas Huntingdon hurried away in a state of mind such as he had never experienced before.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SYNCOPE AND TETANUS

Dimly and feebly did a sense of returning consciousness steal into Ariadne's mind, slowly, slowly as the glimmering of dawn struggles against the mists of night in the eastern horizon. Whether she had fainted or slept she knew not; nor indeed had she the power to reflect upon the point, for her thoughts were all in confusion, not painfully agitating in the brain, but in dull, numb, inert chaos. That there had been a period of oblivion she had something like a distinct notion; but whether it had lasted for days, hours, or only minutes, she knew not, nor had she sufficient clearness of mind to conjecture.

But as the sense of consciousness came back, — as this reawakening of the intellect began to take place, — she became aware that there was somebody in the room. She endeavoured to open her eyes, but could not. Nevertheless, she felt that the light of day was upon those closed lids and that it was not a stupendous darkness that weighed them down. Amidst the dull and stagnant chaos of her thoughts, flickered in upon her intellect a somewhat brighter beam than the primal one of returning consciousness; and this new ray of intelligence seemed to enlighten her the least thing more distinctly as to her exact condition. She became aware, indeed, that she was stretched upon a couch; but after that vain attempt to open her eyes, she remained for perhaps two or three whole minutes without any further endeavour to move. Then hearing a voice suddenly speaking near her, the tones flowing murmuringly upon her ears without her being able to understand the words uttered, she instinctively attempted to turn around toward the speaker. But no! she was bound hand and foot by some invisible

and unknown spell, enchained by some stupendous and indomitable influence, turned into a statue so far as her physical being was concerned, and animated with only just a sufficiency of the spiritual essence to give her a dim and twilight idea of her own condition.

Still was her appreciation of this condition too indistinct, too vague, and too obscure to produce any poignant feeling. Sensation she had, it was true, but so lulled, so steeped in a mystic lethargy, so dull, numb, and sluggish, that it had not sufficient vitality for any keenness of reflection, whether painful or otherwise.

Gradually the idea began to become straightened in Ariadne's mind relative to the presence of some one near her; and at length it seemed as if an inspiration dawned in unto her soul, whispering the name of Douglas Huntingdon. Then she appeared to acquire a knowledge that there was such a person as he in the world; but how or when she had known him before, she had no distinct comprehension. She heard him breathing syllables of sorrow near her, and then she felt him take her hand in his own. A pulse seemed to thrill through her entire frame at that contact, — yes, thrill even pleasurably, as if it were the touch of life giving back animation into one on whom death sat heavy and cold; but yet that thrill was only faint and feeble, and it imparted not complete vitality nor broke the spell that entranced the maiden.

She felt her hand clasped in that of Huntingdon, and she felt, too, by the touch that his hand burned with the fever-heat of excitement, and that her own was as cold as ice. She longed — oh, how she longed — to return the pressure which she felt; for now a strange, vague, and ill-defined perception of the real truth of her condition stole into her mind, and made her feel a desire to make known the fact that she was indeed alive. But not in the slightest, not in the faintest, not in the remotest degree could she return that pressure; not a muscle could she move, not a nerve quivered in response to her will. The faintest breeze has more power to shake the stateliest tree than her volition could exercise over her own faculties of motion. Still as death, motionless as a statue, she lay, with a gentle glimmering of the spark of life that was just conscious of its own existence, but could not make this existence known to another. And now there-

fore arose in her mind the conviction that she breathed not though she lived, and on the other hand, that she was not dead, though animation was all but utterly suspended.

A still brighter clearness shed its influence upon her mind, — that mind which thus, after having first awakened as it were in the midst of a vast hall where a single lamp burned dimly in the midst of the blackness, now felt as if additional lamps were being lighted up one by one, so as to set forth by these slow degrees some fresh features of the place. She heard those words to which the baronet gave utterance with so much feeling, "I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance which was so lovely in its animation." Yes, she heard, she understood these words. She even perceived the impassioned vibration of tone which characterized them, the amount of anguish which they expressed. And again did she experience a thrill of the pulse through her entire frame, but a thrill that was felt not by him who held her hand and who believed it was the hand of the dead. Then this hand of hers was quitted by that of the baronet. The contact had ceased, the fevered flesh and the marble-cold flesh touched each other no more, and instead of the thrill of the vibrating pulse, it was an ice chill that struck to the very core of the maiden's heart.

But now she felt — intuitively, instinctively felt — that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was gazing upon her. Her eyelids were closed, as we have already said; but it was in looking upward as it were from the mind itself — by the exertion, so to speak, of an inner sense of vision — that she thus felt that he was looking upon her. She could even understand the look, she could comprehend its nature, lingering, longing, sad, and mournful. But, O God! why did she not return it? Just Heaven! why could she not?

She heard the door close, and now she knew that she was alone. The silence suddenly struck her as being awful, awful in the extreme; and then, too, at the same instant, a more horrible clearness sprang up in her mind, a fearful light flaming up in her soul. In a word, she understood all in a moment, that she was in a species of trance, a syncope, and that she was believed to be dead.

Dead! great Heaven, what awful thoughts now sprang up in her imagination! Was the hand of death in reality upon her? Was she dying? Would she soon be really dead?

Death! its bitterness was not past, its sting was there, and the grave perhaps would soon assert its victory. But to die — Oh, to die while she felt that she was so young, — for her thoughts were now every instant becoming more vividly clear and more keenly perceptive, — to die so young, it was terrible, terrible! Then her brother, too, — for she now remembered him and thought of him, yes, his image suddenly sprang up clearly and tangibly as it were before her, — this well-beloved brother, what would he think, what would he say when he heard that she had died thus prematurely, thus suddenly? But no, she could not die, she must not die yet. Innocent, stainless of crime, ay, even immaculate though she were in mind as well as in body, she was not prepared to die. She would move her limbs, she would turn around on that couch, she would raise herself up, and she would exhibit all the powers of full, living, breathing, moving vitality. Alas! vain, vain were the thoughts, vain the aspirations, vain the endeavours; so far from stirring hand or foot, she could not even move a muscle of her countenance, nor unclose an eyelid, nor feel her lips quiver with the breath of life.

We said that her mind had now a horrible clearness, and such indeed it was. For her thoughts began to flow in still more frightful and hideous channels, depicting all the paraphernalia of death, — the laying out of the corpse (in her case perhaps a seeming corpse), the putting on of the raiment of the dead, the enclosing in the shell, the screwing down of the lid of the coffin, the consignment to the grave, and the shovelling in of the damp and wormy clay. Heavens! as all these harrowing thoughts swept through the brain of the poor young girl, she endured an agony of agonies ineffable for human language, — an agony all the more agonizing because endured by one whose form was motionless and could not bend or yield as it were with recoil, trembling, or shudder, to the dreadful influence of those thoughts. And now, with the extremest poignancy was the fact presented to her mind that she was not even nearly dead, but that her state was one presenting that phenomenon so strange, so awful, and so terrible in the history of human nature.

The horror produced by all these thoughts gradually merged into the more stupefying state of consternation,

and then a dreamy repose stole over the young maiden. Oblivion supervened, and thus for awhile were her senses steeped in forgetfulness. How long this interval lasted, she however knew not; and when she returned to consciousness she became aware that her posture on the couch was somewhat changed. She was now lying completely on her back, and she felt that her arms were placed close by her sides, and that her feet were likewise in close and parallel contact. Next she perceived, by the sensation, that something was fastened under her chin; and as she began to ponder upon the meaning of all this, the recollection of what had passed just previously to the last interval of oblivion slowly came back to her mind, until at length the awful, the crushing, the appalling thought settled in her soul that she was laid out as a corpse.

Horror of horrors! With full, poignant, and vivid keenness, did all her consciousness return; and she once more became possessed of every faculty of perception. There was no doubt as to her actual position: she knew it, she understood it, she felt it all. She was believed to be dead, she was laid out in the usual manner ere being consigned to the coffin, and the winding-sheet already wrapped her form. The thought of all this was maddening, maddening. Her brain appeared to be on fire, and the sensation of gnawing flames had she also at the heart, though that heart beat not. Her eyelids were closed, nor could she open them; nevertheless lightnings appeared to flash before her vision. It was horrible, horrible, to experience all this, and yet not be able so much as to relieve the harrowed feelings with a shudder or a shriek. For when something dreadful meets the eye or strikes upon the mind, it is a relief to shudder in recoil or to send forth an ejaculation from the lips. But here was the unhappy girl bound as it were in the adamantine chains of utter petrification, a marble body with a soul of fire, incapable of performing the least function of life, and yet inspired with all life's keenest and acutest sensations.

All the faculties belonging to the mind seemed to have concentrated in themselves the vitality which naturally belonged to the body, and all the senses were sharpened to even a painful degree. Thus she could hear sounds the faintest and slightest imaginable, such as insects picking in the wood of the bedstead with the noise of the death-

watch. She could smell the clean linen which wrapped her as a winding-sheet, and which, perhaps from the nature of the soap used in washing it, had a certain earthy odour that made it indeed appear the raiment of the dead. She could feel all the plaits and folds of these cerements as they lay loose upon one portion of her form and tighter on another; she could feel the linen passing around her head, and the cambric that was tied as a bandage to hold up her chin. Through her closed lids could her eyes perceive the light of the sun streaming through the curtains of the window facing the couch, — those beams which borrowed a deeper redness from the hue of those curtains. Thus were her senses acuminated to the keenest edge; and as the body was left motionless, those faculties appeared to exercise themselves with all the concentration of vitality which they had absorbed as it were from the physical powers.

In the midst of her harrowing thoughts she heard the door open, and the housekeeper's voice say in a low and mournful tone, " Walk in, walk in, Mr. Stimson, walk in."

Then the door was closed again very gently, and two persons advanced up to the side of the bed, the housekeeper and the man whom she had called Mr. Stimson.

" What a sweet corpse the dear girl does make," said the housekeeper, assuming a whimpering tone and heaving three or four deep-drawn sighs. " Ah! Mr. Stimson, she wasn't here many hours, but I really had taken quite a fancy to her. She was so amiable and good, and I do believe that in the same short time she grew quite as fond of me."

" Poor young lady! " returned Mr. Stimson, in a hollow and lugubrious voice. " How come it all about, ma'am? "

" Why, you see, Mr. Stimson," resumed the housekeeper, " this young lady was staying at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, and his house was burned down last night. Such rapid progress did the fire make, that the dear girl well-nigh fell a sacrifice to the flames; but a couple of noble-hearted gentlemen — one an officer in the Guards, and the other the son of a bishop — rescued her at the peril of their lives, and the officer wrapped her up in his great military cloak. Then she was put into a hackney-coach that was passing at the time; and as Sir Douglas is very intimate here, he thought the best thing he could do was to send her to be taken care of by Lady Ernestina. The fright which the

young lady received from the fire was no doubt dreadful; but we thought she had quite recovered, and didn't dream that she was in any possible danger. But about ten o'clock this morning the poor dear creature seemed to be taken so bad suddenly that we got quite alarmed, and before we could even send for the doctor she was dead. Lord bless you, Mr. Stimson, she went off just like a child going to sleep in its mother's arms; and with her dear head, poor young creature, pillowed on my bosom, she breathed her last."

"Well, ma'am," said Mr. Stimson, "it's a wery great saytisfaction for you to know that you did your best, while death was doing his wust, and that she went off like that there, with her head on your buzzim. She's as lovely a corpse as ever I had the measuring of."

"Yes," whimpered the housekeeper, "hasn't she got a sweet pretty face, and her flesh is just like wax. Poor thing! the worms will soon make havoc upon it."

"Poor thing!" echoed Mr. Stimson, in his deep, sepulchral voice, which he purposely made as hollow and lugubrious as possible. "The wums indeed will prey upon the poor gal."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader that Ariadne's feelings were now drawn to such an extreme tension, that it appeared as if her brain must burst and her heart-strings snap. She had no difficulty in discovering, from the preceding discourse, who Mr. Stimson was. He was evidently the undertaker. But the vile hypocrisy of that woman, the housekeeper, the false version she gave of the circumstances of Ariadne's arrival at the mansion, the assumed sympathy and commiseration with which she sought to play her part in the presence of the undertaker, — all this added to the poignancy and painfulness of the scene. But then the discourse itself, to hear herself styled a corpse, then the remark that her flesh was colourless as wax, and lastly the observation — the frightful observation — relative to the worms soon preying upon her — Oh, all this was the most exquisite refinement of ineffable agonies!

But this crucifixion of the feelings was not yet passed through. She felt the undertaker place his rule upon her to measure her length for the coffin, and she heard him

mutter to himself, in a low undertone, the exact measurement of feet and inches as he thus took it. Good God! how within herself she battled. Oh, how she battled for the power of sending forth one long, loud, thrilling shriek! How she strove — Heaven alone can tell how she strove — to force a vent for the transcending agony of her feelings! But no; all her efforts were vain and useless. The spell — the awful spell — was upon her; and still like a marble woman was she animated with a soul of fire.

"And so you say, ma'am," observed Mr. Stimson, speaking in a low voice that was well suitable for the chamber of death, but yet with something more of a business tone than hitherto, "and so, ma'am, it is to be a wery decent funeral, not overexpensive, but respectable?"

"Just so," responded the housekeeper. "His lordship has entrusted the whole management to me; and I think, Mr. Stimson," she added, in a significant tone, "that you and I can make everything comfortable between us?"

"Oh! to be sure," responded the undertaker. "Come, ma'am, tell me candidly how high you dare go, and then I can tell you how much profit you and me can sheer betwixt us."

"Well, I don't think his lordship would mind sixty or seventy guineas."

"Wery good," observed Mr. Stimson, with a low, hollow chuckle which appeared to issue from a coffin or a vault, "let's say seventy-five guineas, and then we can divide thirty betwixt us. That will make fifteen for your sheer."

"Agreed," said the housekeeper, "but you must send in a regular proper bill, because the marquis sometimes takes it into his head to look over his accounts."

"Don't be afeard, ma'am. I will put down fifteen guineas for a brick grave, and it sha'n't be no brick grave at all. Then, how many do you think will attend the funeral?"

"I don't know who will attend it: the marquis, I suppose, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, — just for appearance' sake, — and that's all."

"Well, we can put down ten mourners," observed Stimson; "'cause why, the bill must be made out to look respectable. Ten mourners, that will be a guinea each for hat-band and gloves, and a guinea each for the use of mourning cloaks, so there we have twenty guineas at once. Fifteen, as already

said, for the brick grave, makes thirty-five. Coffin, fifteen, makes fifty; shell, five guineas, and use of pall, five guineas, there's sixty. Hearse and mourning coaches, ten guineas, that's seventy; and ten of my chaps, half a guinea each, there's five guineas, and that makes up the seventy-five."

"Well, you really are one of the cleverest gentlemen I ever met with," said the housekeeper, with a subdued laugh. "But after all, fifteen guineas apiece is very little to get out of this business."

"Well," observed Mr. Stimson, "I'll manage to add five to your sheer. Let me see, I said fifteen guineas for the coffin, of course I meant a first-rate oaken one; but I tell you what I'll do, I'll give a common one, painted and grained to look like oak, and that's the way I'll do it. The poor gal there won't be none the wiser."

"Ah! you dear, clever fellow," chuckled the housekeeper in a subdued tone. "A man of your talent, Mr. Stimson, ought to have been Prime Minister, instead of an undertaker."

"Well, ma'am, I think I have got a little talent," returned Mr. Stimson, with a complacent manner; "but I am wery well satisfied with my wocation, and don't know that I should improve it particular by a change. But I think we have done here all that is required now?"

"One word," said the housekeeper, "when shall the funeral take place?"

"Suppose we say this day week?" suggested the undertaker. "The corpse is a nice fresh 'un," he continued, laying his great heavy rough hand upon Ariadne's cheek, "and won't spile. Besides, it will look better to take plenty of time for the funeral; 'cause why, we are 'to pretend to have a brick grave and a oak coffin."

"Then let us say this day week," rejoined the housekeeper, and she thereupon quitted the room, accompanied by Mr. Stimson.

Ariadne was once more alone. Alone indeed; but, good heavens! with what hideous, horrible, excruciating thoughts, — thoughts that swept like fiery arrows through her brain, conjuring up images from the charnel-house and the grave. Like ghastly spectres treading to the solemn measure of a dirge, did they pass in array before her mental vision. Yes, for she was treated as one that was dead, laid out as

a corpse, and had just been an ear-witness to the arrangements devised for her own funeral. She had felt the rule of the undertaker taking her measure for a coffin, and she had felt likewise his rough hand laid upon her cheek with the cold brutal indifference of one who is accustomed to handle the dead. And then that woman, who had affected so much sympathy in her behalf, was now actually trafficking in her supposed death, — trafficking for profit to be derived from the funeral of her whose fate she pretended to deplore. And then that cold-blooded, heartless, hypocritical scoundrel, — the undertaker himself, — he also was making a market of the dead. He also was practising the slimy ways of the money-grubber in respect to the supreme and most solemn rites of mortality and of the Christian faith.

All these circumstances, all these reflections, combined to aggravate, if possible, the horror which previously filled Ariadne's soul; and she already felt as if she were in the depths of the cold grave, with the clay filled up over the coffin.

Again did the stupor of oblivion enwrap her mind; and when she reawoke to consciousness utter darkness rested upon her closed eyelids. The silence and the blackness of night entombed her, — stupendous night, always fraught with vague and dreamy fears even for those in fullest health, but now marked by ten thousand terrors for her who was alive in the secrecy of her own sensations, but dead to the exercise of all faculties, dead also to the world without.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE TRANCE CONTINUED

IMMEDIATELY upon quitting Leveson House, Sir Douglas Huntingdon repaired to Carlton Palace and sought an interview with Venetia. Lady Sackville at once received the baronet in the breakfast-parlour where she was seated at the time; and, pointing toward a newspaper which lay upon the table, she said, "My dear friend, it was with the sincerest sorrow that I read the half-dozen lines in that journal which mention the fire at your house last night. It is, however, a subject of congratulation that you are safe. But you look dreadfully careworn and haggard — "

"No wonder, Venetia," observed the baronet, "after all that I have gone through."

He then sat down and gave her an account of everything that had transpired within the last two days. Commencing his narrative from the moment when he parted with Louisa Stanley at Dartford, he proceeded to describe the perilous adventures of Shooter's Hill. He told Venetia how circumstances had thrown Ariadne in his way, how she had saved his life at the hut, how they had fled together, and how he had given her an asylum at his own house; he then explained who she was, and in confidence revealed to Lady Sackville's ear those particulars relative to Theodore and his sister which have been made known to the reader in a previous chapter. Lastly, he narrated the circumstances of the young girl's abduction to the Marquis of Leveson's house, and concluded with a description of her death.

At first, when he began to speak of Ariadne, Sir Douglas observed that Venetia's beauteous eyes glittered somewhat with a jealous uneasiness; and naturally flattered by this

proof that he was very far from being an object of indifference to the lovely idol of fashion, he cautiously abstained from uttering a word calculated to show that Ariadne had made the slightest impression of a tender character upon his heart. He spoke of her in a tone of compassionate friendship, and speedily observed that a gleam of satisfaction stole over the features of Lady Sackville. But when he came to that portion of his narrative which described Ariadne's death, — or, rather, her supposed death, — when indeed he explained how the sensual brutality of the Marquis of Leveson had been the cause of the lamentable catastrophe, Venetia's splendid countenance coloured with indignation, and she murmured between her set teeth, "That destestable Marquis of Leveson! Will the day of retribution never dawn for him?"

"And now, my dear Venetia," resumed the baronet, "I will explain to you in a few words the object of my visit. Indeed you must grant me a boon this moment, you must do me a service without delay —"

"You know, my dear Douglas," she responded, with a peculiar look of mingled tenderness and significancy, "that there is nothing you can demand of me which I am not prepared to grant. Tell me, therefore, how I can serve you. But I think I can already conjecture: is it not the pardon of Theodore Varian that you require?"

"It is, dearest Venetia, it is," replied the baronet.

Lady Sackville spoke not another word, but rising from her seat, quitted the room. She remained absent for about an hour, at the expiration of which interval she returned; and by the smile of satisfaction that played upon her charming lips, Sir Douglas saw that she had succeeded.

"This is the pardon — the full, free, unconditional pardon of Theodore Varian," she observed, handing the baronet a paper. "Fortunately the Secretary of State was with his Royal Highness at the moment, and therefore the document is duly countersigned. I explained to them both a sufficiency of the particulars connected with the case of Theodore Varian to prove that he was as much sinned against by his late master Emmerson, as sinning; and I likewise told them in confidence a little of his poor sister's history. The Minister therefore made not the slightest objection to grant the pardon; and as for his Royal Highness," added

Venetia, proudly, " of course he was instantaneously prepared to grant my demand."

" Ten thousand thanks, dear Venetia, for this prompt kindness on your part," exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, glancing his eye over the paper ere he consigned it to his pocket. " And now you will excuse me for leaving you abruptly, inasmuch as I am anxious to transmit this pardon to Theodore Varian, together with the letter containing the sad intelligence of his sister's death."

" And do you propose," asked Venetia, " to veil from Mr. Varian the infamy of the Marquis of Leveson toward his sister? "

" Of what avail, Venetia, will it be to augment the sorrows of this already too unfortunate young man? Besides, I myself have not been immaculate enough in my life to feel justified in becoming the accuser of others; but on the other hand I have so many faults of my own to screen that I consider it but just to throw a veil if possible over the faults of my friends or acquaintances."

" Well, be it so, Douglas," observed Venetia. " And now depart to execute your purpose with regard to Varian; I will not detain you a minute longer. But remember," she added, with a meaning look, " I shall always be delighted and happy to see you."

" Ah! Venetia, do not fancy that I am not likewise too happy to find myself in your society." Then, hastily raising her hand to his lips, he hurried from the room.

Returning to the hotel where he had taken up his quarters, he sat down and penned a letter to Theodore Varian. In this epistle he broke to the young brother as gently as he could the intelligence of the sister's death, which he attributed to the shock produced by the conflagration upon the previously attenuated mind of the young girl. This letter, accompanied by the pardon, Sir Douglas Huntingdon at once sent off by a courier to Dover, in the hope that the messenger might overtake Varian previous to his embarkation for France; but if not, the courier was instructed to lose no time in following the young man to the Continent. Having adopted these measures, Sir Douglas Huntingdon turned his attention to his own affairs; for he felt for the first time in his life the necessity of expelling thought by means of bustle and occupation. Indeed, the image of

Ariadne was uppermost in his mind; and frequently, frequently did he find himself giving way to the gloomiest reflections, and pondering upon her whom he had known but for so short a time and who had been so rudely and suddenly snatched away from him, as he thought, for ever.

In the evening Doctor Copperas called at the hotel, and on being shown to the room where the baronet was sitting alone after dinner, the physician expressed himself much shocked at the tidings he had received relative to the death of his fair patient.

"One or two circumstances have rather astonished me in this matter," observed the doctor, as he sat down to take a glass of wine with the baronet: "one is that the poor girl should have been sent to find an asylum at the house of the Marquis of Leveson, who is an unmarried man, or rather a widower; and the second is that I, being the medical attendant of the young lady, was not called in this morning when she was found to be dying. At all events, if his lordship had not chosen to send for me, he would at all events have acted prudently in summoning that truly wonderful man, — the greatest ornament of his profession, — I mean Doctor Thurston."

"My good friend," returned the baronet, "your two objections are very easily met. In the first place, it was necessary to consign the young girl to the care of some kind-hearted lady; and being acquainted with Lady Ernestina Dysart, I thought it best to send the poor creature to her. Secondly, the Marquis of Leveson was unaware that you were the medical attendant — "

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Doctor Copperas; "I am perfectly satisfied with what you have said, my dear Sir Douglas. But perhaps you will permit me to observe that in these cases of rapid sinking and speedy dissolution arising from fright, there are so many curious phases and phenomena that they never ought to be lost sight of by the medical man in attendance at the time. Now I feel perfectly convinced that if that very remarkable authority, Doctor Thurston, had been called in on this occasion, he would have given to the world a most valuable treatise upon the subject."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was in no humour to converse with so tedious a personage as Doctor Copperas. He accord-

ingly fell into a deep abstraction, and the physician, having dilated for about twenty minutes upon the merits of Doctor Thurston as a medical practitioner, and the learning of Doctor Thurston as a medical authority, took his leave.

A couple of days passed, and the baronet's confidential domestic James returned from Dover. He had succeeded in finding Theodore Varian, and had delivered to him the messages and the purse of money sent by the baronet, whose advice it appeared the young man had promptly followed by repairing to Calais. Indeed, James had seen him embark on board the hoy; and thus was it clear that he had quitted England ere being overtaken by the messenger who bore his pardon.

The next day Sir Douglas Huntingdon proceeded to Leveson House to inquire how the preparations proceeded for Ariadne's funeral. The marquis was not at home at the time, and Lady Ernestina Dysart, who detested the baronet ever since his interference in the affair of Louisa Stanley, affected to be retained in her own room by indisposition. The housekeeper accordingly took upon herself to answer the baronet's queries, and she assured him that the most satisfactory preparations were being made. Sir Douglas Huntingdon desired the woman to conduct him to the chamber where Ariadne lay; for he experienced an irresistible longing to behold once more in death that sweet countenance which had made so deep an impression upon him in life. The housekeeper accordingly proceeded to what was believed to be the chamber of death; and the moment the baronet crossed the threshold a feeling of indescribable awe mingled with the profound mournfulness which already filled his heart.

But when he beheld that waxlike countenance on which there was nothing of the ghastliness or loathsomeness of death, when he beheld it fresh and damask-like as it was in life, — the only appearance of death being the utter absence of all vital tint, — he could not help exclaiming, "Good heavens! surely she does but sleep."

The housekeeper shook her head with an assumed melancholy, as she observed in a low tone, "When no positive disease or previous illness is the cause of death, the corpse frequently remains thus fresh and well preserved."

"Death! Is this indeed death? Can it be death?"

mused the baronet, in a low tone to himself, as he stood gazing down upon that countenance so soft in its very rigidity, so sweet in its immovability, so full of ineffable expression in its utter stillness. "If this be death, then death is not terrible; no, 'tis nothing but a slumber a little more profound than that into which we sink at night, only, only, to this slumber here there is no awakening. This is the eternal night that on earth hath no dawn."

While thus musing, in a low tone, Sir Douglas Huntingdon had bent over the form of the young girl who lay stretched upon that couch, and a tear dropped from his eyelash upon her cheek. With his cambric handkerchief he gently wiped it away, murmuring between his lips, "Poor Ariadne, poor Ariadne! if you had lived, the feeling which you had already inspired and which I experience now in my soul would have expanded into the strongest and purest love, and you should have been my wife."

Then, stooping down, he gently kissed her alabaster forehead, and, turning abruptly away, hurried from the room, followed by the housekeeper.

If anybody a few days previously had told Sir Douglas Huntingdon that within a week he was destined to be moved by such feelings as these, destined to experience the influence of such melting, chastening, and reforming thoughts trooping through his mind, he would have ridiculed the prophecy and laughed at the prophet. But no man can say how soon the sentiment of love may animate his breast, nor how quickly it may enthrone itself in the sanctuary of the heart.

It was now the afternoon of the fourth day of Ariadne's supposed death; and during this period a profound stupor had entranced her thoughts at such frequent and for such intervals that her soul, rent with a million tortures when awake, was thus refreshed and invigorated as it were by those periods when its agonies were numbed in syncope and its thoughts steeped in oblivion. But to describe the reflections and the terrors which she experienced when awake would be to recapitulate that delineation of the feelings which we have previously attempted. We may, however, observe that occasionally did a gleam of hope penetrate through the murky clouds that girt her soul, — a hope that she might yet be enabled to shake off the tram-

mels of this tremendous spell which was upon her and give evidence of her vitality before being consigned to the coffin and buried alive.

She was awake, and she was giving way to this hope at the moment when Sir Douglas Huntingdon paid that visit which has just been alluded to. She immediately recognized his voice as he stood speaking musingly by the side of the couch; and with that keenness of sense which has previously been mentioned, she could hear as plainly all that he said as if he were speaking in a much louder tone, whereas the housekeeper who stood close by could not catch the meaning of his words. And by a sort of mesmeric influence, also, did Ariadne become aware that he was gazing down upon her. Yes, and it seemed as if through her closed eyelids she could even observe the nature of that look, so full of a mournful tenderness; and then ineffable feelings sprang up in her heart, and when she heard him murmur those words avowing his love and deploring that she had not lived to become his wife, the poor girl felt for a moment as if she were being suddenly gifted with the power to cast off the spell of the trance, fling her arms around his neck, weep upon his breast, and prove that she was alive. That was a moment, a single moment of beatific feeling for the unfortunate Ariadne; but the darkest, deepest, blackest despair suddenly seized upon her soul as she felt herself still tied down to that couch, still enchained in motionless rigidity, still cold and lifeless as marble in body, though with a mind that was every instant flaming up with the accumulated violence of a thousand volcanoes.

Then she felt the tear-drop upon her cheek. Heavens! it seemed to sink down into her very heart. Oh, that tear, that tear, it was a pledge of love — Good God! what mockery for her to dream of such bliss as that which is concentrated in the word love!

Deeper, yes, deeper, deeper down into the lowest abyss of despair was she plunged, as all hope abandoned her. Then she felt the tear wiped away from her face; then the kiss was imprinted upon her brow, and then there were sounds of hurried retreating steps, and the door closed again, and she was once more alone. Yes, and once more did she relapse into that stupor which gave her mental energies the means and the leisure to repose and regain

their strength in order to put forth their excruciating vitality again.

When she next awoke she became aware that there was a candle or a lamp in the room. Through her closed eyelids could she distinguish where it was; and then she heard several heavy feet moving about the chamber, though with an evident endeavour that their tread should be as light as possible. A horrible suspicion sprang up in the poor girl's mind; and it was almost immediately confirmed by other sounds which struck upon her ears. These sounds were those of wood coming in contact with wood, one thing being lifted upon another; and then she knew that the undertaker's men were in the room placing the shell upon the trestles.

It instantaneously struck her that if ever the excruciation of her mental agonies should become sufficiently keen to inspire her physical being with new life, this must be the moment. If the asphyxia should now prove stronger than that anguish which was torturing her soul to such an extent as apparently to render it capable of inspiring marble itself with motion, then in that case did it seem as if all hope might be really abandoned. She felt her mind struggling within, or, rather, she made it struggle with all the violence of desperation to force it, as it were, to give vent to its feelings in any one of the numerous evidences of life, such as a shudder, a shriek, a stretching forth of the arms, a turning of the head, an opening of the eyelids, or even a quivering of the lips. But no, nothing of all this could she accomplish. Her mind was imprisoned in a form rigid and impracticable as marble; and it seemed to her as if she herself were vainly struggling for emancipation from the interior of a stone sepulchre in which, like a Roman vestal of ancient times, she was walled up.

But we cannot describe the full horror of her thoughts on this head; we must leave the reader much to imagine and depict unto himself. For now the moment, the dread moment had come when Ariadne was to be placed in the shell. It was from habit that the undertaker and his men trod as gently as possible in the room, from habit that they spoke in undertones suited to the chamber of death, from habit that they laid their hands upon her gently and delicately. It was habit all, for in their nature they were no

more susceptible of sympathy than other men. On the contrary, from being in the frequent companionship of the dead, they knew neither awe nor pity. Indeed, their feelings were much blunted and their hearts much brutalized by their avocation; and if a proof of this were wanting, it might have been found in the fact that the housekeeper, knowing their predilection, at this moment entered the room with a tray containing a bottle of spirits and several glasses. Thereupon the undertaker and his men turned away from the couch, and approached the toilet-table where the housekeeper deposited the tray.

"Now, ma'am, will you jine in?" asked Mr. Stimson, as he filled all the glasses around.

"Well, I'll just take a leetle drop, so as not to seem unfriendly," said the housekeeper.

"That's right, ma'am. And now," continued Stimson, raising a brimming glass to his lips, "here's your wery good health, ma'am, and here's his lordship's health, too, and wishing us all good luck," with which benediction the undertaker screwed up his eyes, as if to shut out the fume of the liquor as he tossed it down his throat.

Having refreshed themselves with a dram, the servitors of death returned to the couch, and once more resumed their hold upon Ariadne. Not the concentrated anguish of ten thousand racks, not the essence powerfully condensed of all the most refined excruciations of the Inquisition, can convey any adequate idea of the agony of agonies which the young girl now endured. All such ideas as the coiling of fiery serpents around the form, of burning alive in candescent flames, of tearing off the scalp and dropping boiling oil upon the brain laid bare, of flaying alive and searing the excoriated flesh with red-hot iron, of passing red-hot needles through the eyes, all such ideas as these, we say, fell incomparably short of the illimitable agony endured by the poor girl as the undertaker and his men lifted her from the bed and put her into the narrow shell.

This being done, the men retraced their way to the toilet-table, and regaled themselves with another dram.

"I never did see a corpse keep so fresh," observed Stimson. "There's no oozing out of the mouth, no discolouring under the eyes, not even any particular blueness of the nails. And then, too, she felt as limp and supple as if only in a fit."

"But I shouldn't like to be only half as dead for all that," said one of the men. "Poor thing," he continued, with the mechanical utterance of the sympathetic ejaculation, "she'll be discoloured and blue enough in a few days, and she'll get stark and stiff enough, too, before she's put into her coffin and screwed down."

Screwed down! Good heavens, what dreadful words, overwhelming as a torrent, devouring as a conflagration, crushing as a thunderbolt! Life appeared now to be really ebbing away from the statue-like form of Ariadne Varian; and oh, how she wished that she might be really dying, that her spirit might be indeed passing, so that she could avoid that crowning horror, that transcendent catastrophe, — being buried alive! Again did a stupor come over her, again were her senses wrapped in oblivion.

The undertaker and his men remained in the room until they had emptied the bottle of spirits, and then they took their leave of the housekeeper and their departure from the mansion.

Presently — she could not tell how long after the stupor had fallen upon her — a roseate radiance appeared to be shining all around Ariadne. She was no longer in the shell, no longer wrapped in the garments of the grave, no longer laid out as a corpse. She felt as if she had been wafted into some other sphere, and a strain of sweet celestial music came floating upon her ears. Then, as those silver octaves made the air melodious, she fancied that she beheld angel shapes hovering before her eyes, shapes of seraphs and of sylphs, with azure garments and white wings. The music swelled into the divinest symphony, exultant throughout the vast regions of space; and it seemed to the maiden that she was wafted quick and unimpeded, but by some invisible power, through the starry firmament, mingling with aerial beings of indescribable beauty. An ineffable pleasure pervaded her soul as she called to mind all the horrors from which she had just escaped; for the barrier between life and death seemed to be indeed passed over, and herself emancipated from the trammels of earth and now soaring in heaven. Presently a form of angelic loveliness and radiant with the sunniest smiles came floating through the roseate atmosphere, — a female form clad in streaming robes of azure and of gold, arranged in alternate

foldings and spangled with countless gems. The long yellow hair floated like a beaming meteor, diffusing an enhanced glory all around. But nothing could equal the celestial benignity and seraphic joy that mingled in that beauteous countenance; so that under this angelic figuration Ariadne recollected not immediately the features of her mother, her long dead mother. Now indeed she knew that she was in heaven; and extending her arms toward the advancing shape, she anticipated the next moment to be clasped to its bosom, when all in an instant the sweet and ecstatic thoughts filling her soul were turned into horror and dismay, the angel shape vanished from her view, utter darkness suddenly entombed her, and down, down she sank as if into an unfathomable abyss!

Down, down she kept descending; down, down into the blackest darkness, where the only change was that made by hideous shapes blacker than the blackness, darker than the darkness itself. Yes, all was confusion and whirl in her brain, a series and a change of mental agony. Now, all of a sudden, a tremendous light appeared; and in the distance were seen the inextinguishable but unconsuming fires of hell. No nearer, however, to them did she approach, but kept falling down, down, far beyond the influence of the molten flames that filled the vast and blazing prison of Satan's kingdom. But as her eyes remained fixed upon that region of fire, she saw that it broke into the shape of immense buildings, vast palaces, tremendous domes, and colossal pillars, all made of the living flame and exhaling the red atmosphere which hung like a lurid cloud above it. Still also as she gazed, she observed the background of that vast city of Satan, — a background forming hills and mountains, some covered with forests, others merely dotted with groups of trees, but all wrought, as it were, out of the lurid, opaque fire. Still keener and keener grew the maiden's power of vision. She now beheld the windows of all the houses, mansions, and palaces in that city of hell, and she saw that those windows were defended by immense bars of fire. But now the entire city seemed to be made of red-hot iron, every feature of the place of one colour, everything formed of one material. And through those bars she beheld myriads of shadowy forms, all red and glowing as if they themselves were penetrated with fire, or heated,

as it were, to a candescent and almost transparent state. Keener grew her vision still, and she saw more. She beheld ineffable anguish depicted on every countenance, an anguish such as no living language can describe. In the palaces she beheld the shapes of those who had once been the kings and queens of the earth; but their crowns were now of red-hot iron, fastened with red-hot nails upon their burning but unconsuming heads. Their sceptres had changed into fiery serpents, their orbs into scorpions of flame. The purple, the scarlet, and the ermine robes that decorated them on earth were succeeded by a flowing vesture of flame; and if in any region of hell the fire was hotter and the torture more agonizing than elsewhere, then was this supremacy of all excruciations to be found in these palaces of the kings and queens. In the great mansions were the shades of those who had been prelates and church dignitaries upon earth, and who, having made religion a means to heap up wealth and honours for their own aggrandizement, were now deservedly enduring retribution in the ebbless and eternal waves of flame that swept through the mansions of red-hot iron. And in other mansions were the lords and those who had been great ones upon earth, but who, having made earth a heaven for themselves and a hell for the masses of their fellow creatures, were now enduring the real hell of the other world.

But gradually all this tremendous spectacle began to fade away from Ariadne's view; and still she appeared to be falling down with the velocity of a flash of lightning, until all was dark once more. Then gradually she awoke to the consciousness that she had been passing through the phases of a dream, wherein she had beholden both heaven and hell.

Then where was she? Were these thoughts, these harrowing thoughts that poured back into her memory, laden with horrible reminiscences, were all these a dream likewise? Was it a dream that she had been in a trance, that she had been treated as one dead, and that preparations were made for her funeral? Was all this a dream, — ah! dared she think so? But, no; great God! no, it was not a dream! She was there, in utter darkness, unable to move, pent up in the narrowest possible space; yes, she was in a trance, and she was in her shell!

Another two days passed away; and during the interval

very brief indeed had been the moments of consciousness endured by the unfortunate girl. But it was now on the sixth evening of her supposed death, and while she was suffering the tortures of a more vivid sensibility than she had experienced for forty-eight hours past, that the door of the chamber was opened, and again did the undertaker and three or four of his men enter the apartment. They bore something with them, too, something heavy and also hollow, something that knocked against the woodwork of the doorway as they brought it in, something ominous and dread to think of. Yes, just Heaven! it was the damsel's coffin that they had brought.

Her coffin! — but she is not dead, the light burns in her soul, although it ceases to shine forth to the view of the world; the lamp is not extinguished, the oil of life is not exhausted. Then wherefore seize upon her now? Wherefore carry her away from the midst of the world to which she belongs, to consign her to the raw, damp solitude of the grave? Oh, it is because she is believed to be dead, and thus as a corpse she is to be treated. Now to her mind rush the many things she has heard in her life relative to people being buried alive, of coffins being opened years after the interment, and the wretched inmates being found to have turned on their sides or their faces, or to have gnawed their own flesh for sustenance; and now, just Heaven! was such to be her fate?

Speaking of sustenance, reminds us to observe that though several days had elapsed since food had passed Ariadne's lips, yet that she experienced neither hunger nor thirst, no, nor yet that sinking at the stomach which is usually felt through want of nourishment. All vital actions of the system were suspended or suppressed in a physical sense; the body seemed to be dead, all its wants and necessities dead likewise, and yet all the senses, how keenly were they alive!

Yes, the coffin was brought in and deposited upon the floor. The undertaker and his men then lifted the shell from the trestles, and placed it inside the coffin; they then raised the coffin itself upon the trestles, leaving the lid loosely lying on the top. Scarcely was this done when the door opened again, and the housekeeper entered. Ariadne knew by the rattling of the glasses that the servitors of

death were about to regale themselves once more with spirits. Such was the case; but this time the tray was not placed upon the toilet table, nor on a chair, nor on the bed, nor yet on the chest of drawers, no, nor on any article of furniture in the chamber, but upon the coffin-lid itself. And then the undertaker and his men, together with the housekeeper, all stood around that coffin and drank the spirits which were poured out.

"Well, Mr. Stimson, how do you think the corpse looks now?" asked the housekeeper.

"Unchanged and fresh as ever, ma'am," was the response. "I never did see such a beautiful corpse in all my life. We'll leave the coffin-lid off till the last moment, because the body's so fresh. If we screwed it down, it would precious soon begin to decompose."

Decompose! good heavens, to talk of this in the hearing of one who was not yet dead!

"Well, now, the funeral's for the day after to-morrow, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon," observed the housekeeper, "and Sir Douglas Huntingdon has told me that he means to attend; so does the marquis, out of respect for Sir Douglas."

"Well," replied Stimson, "we shall have two mourning-coaches, one for his lordship and the baronet, and t'other for me and three of my men, to look like mourners and make the funeral respectable. I always choose the most sorrowful-looking of my people to go with me in a mourning-coach, and it has a wery good effect. But last time, — that was about a month ago, — one of 'em tumbled into the grave when we got to the churchyard, 'cause why he got blazing drunk."

"Well, we mustn't have any drunkenness here, Mr. Stimson," said the housekeeper, in an authoritative tone. "The marquis would be in a frightful way if you didn't all keep perfectly sober."

Here the colloquy ended, the liquor was disposed of, the party of death's servitors, together with the housekeeper, retired, and Ariadne was now alone.

Alone — in her coffin!

END OF VOLUME VII.

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